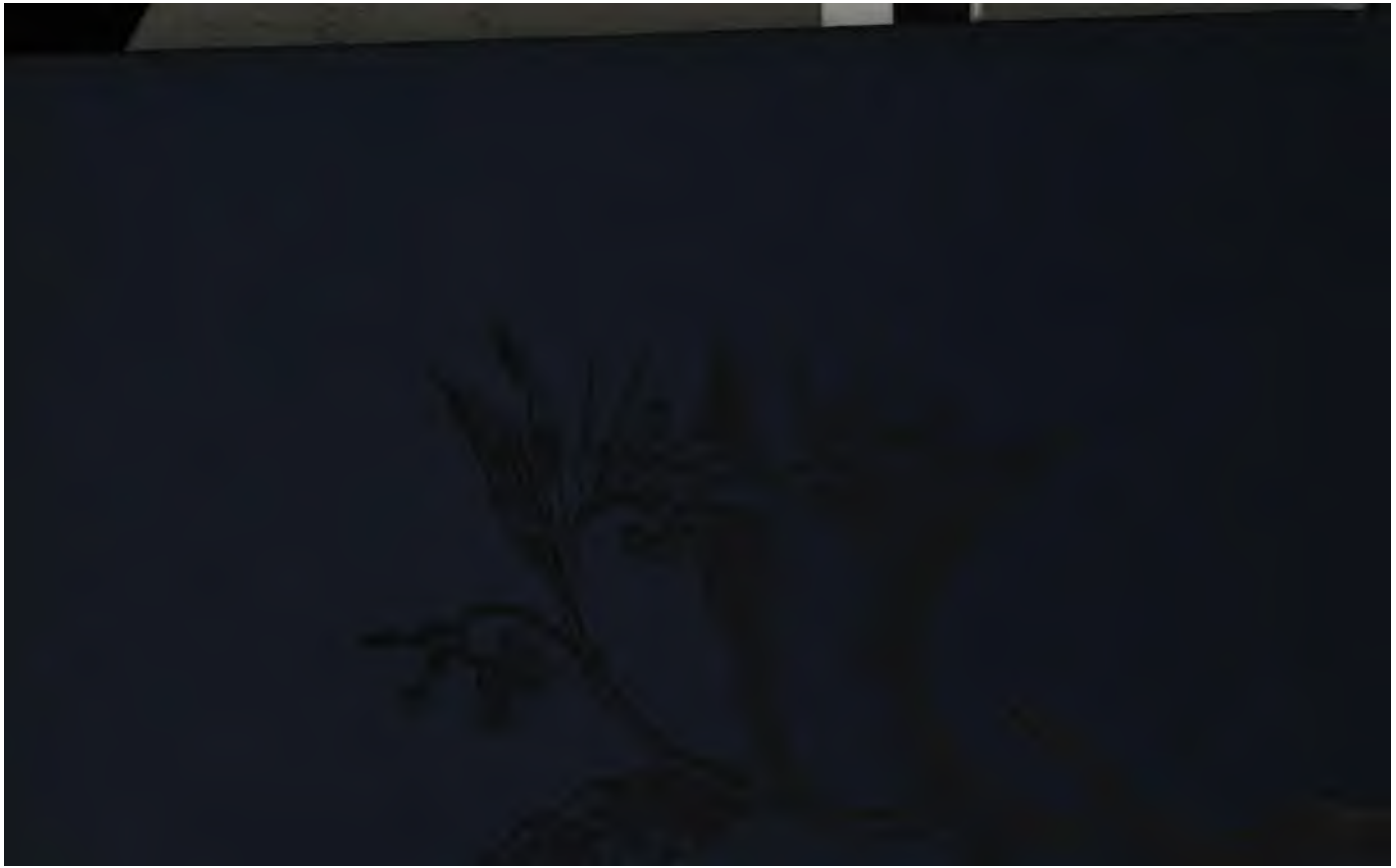

FRAGOLETTA.

FRAGOLETTA.

A Novel.

By "RITA,"

AUTHOR OF

"MY LADY COQUETTE," "COUNTESS DAPHNE," "A SINLESS SECRET,"

ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CHAPTER I.

EXTRACTS FROM CLARICE NORBURTON'S JOURNAL.

WHEN Uncle George made me a present, on my eighteenth birthday, of a beautiful diary, with oxydised-silver clasps and calf binding, I felt rather disgusted.

"It is very kind of you, uncle," I said; "but I am not at all fond of scribbling, and I am sure I could never keep a diary. I should be sure to forget to enter things in it, and as for making it a receptacle of thoughts, and feelings, and confessions, like

the young ladies in novels, I'm sure I never could."

"Oh yes you could, if you made up your mind," he said. "It will be a nice occupation for you, and get you into one habit of regularity at all events. Now promise me you will write something, if only a line or two, every day."

"Well, I will try," I answered, taking the book from his hand, and thinking what a shame it would be to disfigure its smooth white pages with my very careless and anything but neat handwriting. I liked the silver bracelet that accompanied it much better—that was something like a present—but a journal! Oh dear, whatever should I do with the horrid thing? Ah, happy thought! I would write about Harry.

I have written a good deal about

Harry, but it looked such idiotic nonsense that I have torn it all out. Besides, one day we might be—married; and then, of course, he would want to read my journal. Men are so full of curiosity. And that would never do. Just think how conceited he would be if he knew how much I had cared about him, when I had been taking such pains to make him believe exactly the reverse!

August 18*th.*—It is two years since Uncle George gave me my calf-bound journal, and I have only written two pages of it. And Harry has gone to India, and I am no longer eighteen—but respectable staid twenty. Dear me, how horrid it sounds!

Once more I am staying at Woodfield Court, and there is another girl here too; an odd girl I thought at first, but I

like her now, she is so dreamy and thoughtful, and odd in her ways—and only sixteen! She is far more like twenty than I am. She is an Italian by birth, though her father was an Englishman—one of the St. Quentins of Wyefield, that lonely old house on the hill overlooking Leathorpe Hall. He was an artist, and took up his abode in Rome or some of those foreign places, and spent his life in painting pictures, and in dreams. This girl will be just like him, I fancy. She is not pretty—not at all; but there is no saying what she may turn into. She has great deep wistful eyes, and the loveliest hair I ever saw, but she wants colour, and life, and animation. I think that her smile is beautiful, and it steals on one like a surprise. Everybody likes her, I don't know why. We are very different,

but she is very fond of me; quite a romantic, enthusiastic fondness, that is rare in these days, and, ahem!—very gratifying.

So Major Rayburne is now staying with Harry's uncle, Mr. Thornton. I have heard a great deal about him from Harry, and I met him at dinner last night for the first time. What a handsome man he is!

He quite cuts Harry out.

After all, a young man is not nearly so nice as a middle-aged one. Perhaps the major would object to be called middle-aged. He looks about thirty. Oh, but he must be old; because I have always heard old men like girls who are very young, and he seems devoted to the little Italian. Of course he thinks her a child still; indeed, who

could help thinking so, unless they saw her smile?

Days and days have passed. The major is a disappointment.

Oh, he must be old—very old! He is blind to all my allurements; he wilfully ignores my many attractions; he never seems to see me. Is that not aggravating? I appeal to any good-looking woman—I beg pardon, girl of twenty! I have never had any difficulty till now in captivating men, young, old, or middle-aged. So I say again the captain—no, I beg his pardon, major—must be decidedly old. I appeal to ——But stop a minute; what is the use of appealing to anybody, for no one will ever see or read this stupid journal but myself? Now to return to the major. I must really warn Fragoletta

about him. Of course, the child could never imagine he was serious in his attentions; but he is always with her, and talks to her in preference to me—a piece of bad taste for which I can't readily forgive him—so I shall give her a hint.

I have given her the hint. I can't quite make out how she took it. She is always very quiet, but I had no idea how much pride and dignity could lurk behind that childish face. "I quite understand," she said. I hope I have not hurt her feelings. I would not do that for the world; but she is so different to other girls it is hard to tell. How wistful her great dark eyes looked as she turned them on me! —it reminded me of the look I once saw in the eyes of a wounded deer.

She was so calm and quiet; but whence came the gentle dignity that sat so well upon her; that seemed to warn me back from further attempt at confidence? And all day long I never got the sight of that quiet little figure out of my head; and over and over again, throughout the long and busy hours, have I heard those gentle words: "I understand, Clarice." Heaven forgive me if I have done any harm by meddling! But she—oh, she is such a child still, and he is double her age, not only in years but in experience.

Actually the major has gone! It was very sudden—awfully sudden. Only yesterday we were at a picnic together, and what fun it was! But this morning, as I was gathering roses in the garden, I saw him coming up the avenue

looking so grave and solemn. I thought something was the matter; but he would say nothing till he was in Aunt Isabel's morning-room, and then he told us he must go back to India. The news of his departure did not concern me so much as the idea of poor Harry's regiment being obliged to go and fight those horrid black people. Oh, India is a detestable place; I am sure I shall never, never have courage to go out there.

Well, the major stopped a long time chatting away, and promising to send us news of how he got on; also a box of Indian curiosities. I wonder whether he will remember that, by-the-way? I should like a real Cashmere shawl, or a lot of that lovely embroidery they make out there; how useful it would be for my trousseau! Oh dear! how did that word slip out? Really, I

must never let Harry see this book; how he would tease me!

My little friend took his departure very coolly. I don't think she can really care for him, except just in a grand-daughterly (what a horrid word to write!) sort of way. After all, he is quite old. I am sure I saw a gray hair in his head to-day. What a handsomely-shaped head it is though! I think Harry must look very young—quite a boy beside him; and yet they are such friends. Damon and Pythias, Uncle George calls them.

We have had such a quiet day. Fragoletta and I went for a walk together, but she talked very little; and though I rattled on about the major, and everything else interesting I could think of, she did not seem one bit interested.

She says she must go home next week; her aunts want her. How tiresome! Whatever am I to do all by myself, and not an eligible male creature in the place to flirt with? Mr. Thornton is very nice, but then I must be on my best behaviour with him, or he would not think me a suitable wife for Harry.

There I go again! Dear me, if this diary should ever fall into his hands, what will he say? However, I shall burn it, or tear it up the day I am married — that's to say if I can remember to do so.

September 21*st*, 18—. It is a long time since I have written anything down. Really this Leathorpe is a most stupid place. I wonder everybody doesn't die of *ennui*. Fragoletta has

gone back to Wyefield, and actually set up a studio for herself! I went over to see it. She must really be clever. She got her aunts' permission to have a large bare attic room to do what she liked with, and she has stained the floor all dark, and put mats and rugs about (for which she had to send to London), and she fixed brackets on the walls, with lovely old china, and has pictures of her father's painting hung about, and flowers everywhere, and quaint old-fashioned chairs and a couch of rich crimson velvet, almost the only bit of colour in the whole room. It is really quite artistic; and then to see her standing before her easel, with a close-fitting long brown-holland blouse over her black dress, and all that wonderful dusky hair crowning her little head—she makes a quaint pretty picture herself!

And how beautifully she paints! She has real genius, I believe. No mere ladylike daubs, to be touched up by a drawing-master, here. She has decided on an ambitious subject. I saw the first sketch or design of it, but it seems to me that no one could have the patience to carry it out.

"Why do you work so hard?" I asked her.

It seemed a rebuke to me, this industry, as I lounged there in the sunlight, watching those busy fingers and dreaming eyes.

She looked at me with that shadowy wistful smile.

"One must do something," she said. "A life of emptiness would never content me."

Child as she was, that rebuke seemed to sting my own idleness and frivolity.

"I wish I were like you" I said. "But somehow I never feel inclined to do anything that savours of work or toil."

"We cannot all be alike," she said gently.

"Do you work for love of art or fame?" I asked presently, my eyes turning from the busy fingers to the absorbed face of the young painter.

"I work because I love it," she answered. "Fame! I never thought of that."

"What will you do with your picture when it is finished, then?"

"I shall send it to London," she said simply. "If it is worth anything they will tell me."

"Will they, indeed?" I said, laughing. "My dear, you know little of business or bargaining, or you would not say that. If your work be ever so

full of merit, that is just the last thing they will tell you. If you have no friends, no interest, no one to work or speak for you, the picture will come back just as you sent it. I have not lived in London all these years for nothing. Unaided talent, especially a woman's, has a poor look-out, I can tell you."

"It does not matter," she said, smiling. "It is in me to work. I must do it."

I was silent from sheer wonder.

"Perhaps, after all, you are best without fame," I said to her at last. "It is a bad thing for a woman, they say."

"It would not harm me, I think," she answered. "Whatever I do falls so far short of what I wish to do that I could never be content with it."

"You have not done much yet," I said. "You are only a beginner."

"I have studied art from my very childhood," she answered calmly. "I have had pictures bought in Florence, and accepted in art-competitions, none knowing who was the painter."

"Do you take any name," I asked, "or keep to your father's?"

"I signed them always 'Iris,'" she said. "Perhaps some day, when I have done something more worthy of my dead father's teaching, I shall take my right name too. But he has made it so great, I should not like to dishonour it by any imperfect work."

I was silent.

There are times when Fragoletta soars far above me, when I feel like the child that she ought to be and is not. Is it the genius that is in her soul

that makes me feel so humble and ashamed and mean before those calm glorious eyes, that look at me and beyond me to some dim heights her fancy has glorified and ennobled? I think it must be, for indeed I am but a commonplace mortal myself, and there are times when I feel I would give my golden hair and Grecian features, and all the physical beauty that has been lauded in my ears so often, just for the pure soul and rich gifts of this little brown-eyed maiden.

I go away from her now, and leave her to her dreams, for it seems sacrilege to draw her down to those grosser subjects of earth, and the world, and fashion, which make up so large a sum in the arithmetic of my conversation.

I wonder, sometimes, what Harry would think of her? I hope he would

not fall in love with her; that would never do; though the introduction of a slight element of jealousy into our courtship would doubtless prove exhilarating to—me. I am not sure that it would not even be the quickest method of inducing me to make up my mind—a process I have been vainly endeavouring to accomplish these last two years!

Really the entries in my journal are assuming quite formidable dimensions. I am glad to see that I have hopes of fulfilling Uncle George's expectations at last; and now a still further incentive is added to this laudable intention. It arose thus.

When Fragoletta and I were out walking after tea last evening (I had been spending the day with her), I told her, as a great secret, that I was keeping a

journal. "Why don't you do the same?" I asked. "It is the easiest thing in the world, once you get accustomed to it. Try."

She almost laughed. It is very rare for Fragoletta to laugh.

"Keep a journal!" she said. "I have always done so."

"You don't mean it!" I cried in astonishment. "Good gracious, what a girl you are! You do everything."

"Oh no," she said in her quaint gentle way, "not everything. But I took to keeping a diary or journal in order to number the different events that occurred in my life, and I have grown accustomed to the habit. My last one ended with my dear father's death. It is put away now, with all the sweet and tender memories of my childhood. I began afresh when I came here."

"Let us make a compact," I cried eagerly. "When we have both finished our books we will exchange them with each other. You shall read mine and I yours. Won't it be fun!"

She coloured and looked a little confused. "I — I hardly know," she said; "I have grown accustomed to writing down thoughts and feelings that I should not like other eyes to read. If a journal is a faithful record of ourselves, there must always be in it that reflex of our inner nature which is unknown and unguessed at by the world at large. To expose such weakness to another person demands a larger share of courage than I possess."

"Oh, you have been writing horrid things about me, I can see," I said, pouting. "You are dreadfully serious even about merest trifles. I shouldn't

mind who saw my journal, except—Harry."

"And why Harry?" she asked, laughing.

"Oh!" I said, reddening a little as I remembered some dressing-room confessions not recorded in my book, "it might make him conceited, you know."

"I believe you care for him after all," she said earnestly. "I wish he would come home and insist upon your making up your mind."

"I wish he would," I said, laughing; "but then he would have to sell out, for I should never go to India. However, it is much more probable that he will be wounded, or have an arm or a leg shot off by some of those horrid blacks, and then——"

"Well, and then? Should you not love him all the more because he was suffering and helpless?"

I looked at her in amazement.

"You Quixotic little creature!" I exclaimed. "Whatever have I said or done in the whole course of our acquaintance to make you suppose I should be a suitable wife for a Greenwich pensioner—for that's what all wooden-legged men are like?"

"But he might not have a wooden leg," she said, laughing more heartily than I had heard her laugh for many a week.

"Oh, he would be sure to," I said gravely. "And it would be such a pity; for between you and me, my dear, I don't mind saying that Harry has really awfully nice legs."

"Harry is gradually becoming an embodiment of all manly perfection," she answered teasingly. "I foresee a change soon, Clarice."

"Oh no," I said stoutly, and going back with zealous determination to my original objection. "I assure you not, my dear. I never, never could endure India!"

CHAPTER II.

A MODERN PYRAMUS.

September 25th.—I have often teased Fragoletta about her young neighbour—the old squire's grandson. Last night, when we were out in the garden, I made her take me to the place where she first saw him. It is the worst part of the grounds—a dry, neglected, weed-choked spot, and rising up behind it are the tall iron railings which divide Leathorpe Park from Wyefield. We had hardly made our appearance when, on the other side of the railings, I spied the youth.

"Really, it might have been a rendezvous," I whisper to Fragoletta.

She looks very much embarrassed; not so he. He raises his hat (one cannot very well shake hands through a railing).

"Good-evening," he says. "So you have come home again?"

"I have been home some time," answers Fragoletta.

"Yes," I interpose, not seeing any reason why I should not join in the conversation. "Two or three weeks."

He honours me with a searching look. He is wonderfully handsome—for anyone who admires fair men. I don't.

"You are staying with your friend, I suppose?" he says, favouring me with another glance.

Now that I look at him, I can see he has a very ill-tempered expression.

"Oh no!" I answer glibly. "I have only been spending the day with her."

I am really not quite sure, but I fancy he looks relieved at this piece of information. Certainly he is very ill-tempered; he quite scowls sometimes.

"Don't you find it very lonely here?" I ask affably. "We never see you anywhere out of your own domains. It is a marvel to me how you exist."

"Is it?"

That is all he says. How odious people are who won't aid one's conversational efforts! He stands looking as coolly at me as if I were a stick or a tree. I also look at him, indignantly I hope. I certainly feel it.

"How is your grandfather, Mr. Brooklyn?" I ask presently.

He starts; so does Fragoletta.

"Quite well, thank you," he says in a

constrained formal sort of voice. "I—I was not aware that you knew him."

"No; I have not that pleasure," I answer coolly. "But it does not prevent my taking an interest in his welfare."

"I am sure he would be flattered if he knew it," says this disagreeable youth.

"No he wouldn't!" I retort pettishly. "He is far above feeling interested in such trifles. From all accounts, he has modelled his conduct on the delightful manners of 'Timon of Athens.'"

"Oh Clarice, hush!" entreats my little friend softly.

The youth turns his angry eyes from me to her. Can I believe it? Yes, actually, all the anger and ill-temper die out of them in a moment. He looks quite different as he speaks. "I am sorry you should have heard so bad an account of him," he says. "He leads

a lonely self-contained life, and dislikes all society; but he has had many griefs and troubles. I can scarcely wonder he shuns all intercourse with his fellows."

"Nor I—the old wretch!" I mutter *sotto voce*, disregarding the warning glance from Fragoletta's dark eyes.

"I hope I am not interrupting your walk," he continues presently.

"Oh no," says my little friend, speaking for herself, I suppose. "There really is not much of a walk here, as you see. It is not by any means the most interesting spot in the garden."

"Is that the reason you so seldom come?"

As he asked that question I glance at him quickly, and see what Fragoletta never sees—the longing impatient look in his eyes as they rest on her face. "Blows the wind so?" I say to myself,

and I feel amused at her unconsciousness. What a romance is here! The young heir of Brooklyn and the daughter of a St. Quentin; the two families having been at feud with each other for years past!

"Of course," she answers quietly as he asks that question. "Why should one voluntarily seek what is unsightly and disagreeable?"

"I don't know; I suppose you are right," he stammers. "Did you get very wet in the storm that day I met you?"

"About as wet as I could," she says, laughing at the recollection, and blushing too, or my eyes mislead me. "I am afraid you suffered the same fate," she continues.

"Yes; but despite your warning, I took shelter under the trees."

"Why didn't you come to the Court?"

I interpose affably; "we should have been very pleased to give you shelter. My uncle and aunt were saying they wished they could invite you to our picnic."

"Did you have a picnic?" he inquires with evident curiosity.

"Yes, we went to Fontayne Abbey. Of course you know it."

"I have seen it—yes," he answers somewhat reluctantly.

Really I never found any young man so hard to get on with as this individual is. I wonder what to say next, and glance at him by way of inspiration. His eyes are again fixed on Fragoletta. Is he in love with her? It looks alarmingly like it, and she—well, she just stands there as innocently and unconsciously as if she had neither thought nor knowledge of such a thing.

But perhaps she hasn't. I always forget how much older I am than she is, and therefore my perceptions are naturally more acute.

There is an awkward little pause in the conversation, but it is broken in a manner as alarming as it is unexpected, for there comes a sudden rustling in the brushwood, then a white and ghastly face looks fiercely at us through the rails, and our young neighbour's arm is clutched by a most unfriendly hand to all appearance.

"So," hisses a harsh, grating voice, "so this is the way you pass your time, is it? You young idiot! you——"

The poor boy's face flushes burning red. He tries to shake off the grip that holds him, but in vain.

As for Fragoletta, she has turned deadly pale, and looks with wide and terrified eyes at this new intruder.

I guess who he is in a moment: the old miser of Leathorpe Hall—the amiable grandfather of this modern Pyramus.

We all stand and look at each other in consternation. The polite and amiable grandfather glares at Fragoletta as if he would like to tear her in pieces.

For an instant the supreme ludicrousness of our situation flashes across me, and I burst into a mad fit of laughter that nothing can stop.

"Oh Clarice, hush!" entreats Fragoletta in an 'agonised voice.

I endeavour to command my feelings, but, oh! how I wish I could draw the picture of that old blear-eyed bristling monster on the other side of the friendly railings.

The young man finds his voice by this time, and I am glad to see he has some spirit, for he turns and faces his grand-

father, and his face looks more ferocious and scowling than ever. What a delightful pair they are! How intensely they must enjoy life together, especially when varied by little social amenities like the present!

"You have no right to address me like this," he says. "What harm have I done, pray, in speaking to this young lady? We are neighbours——"

"Neighbours!" cries the old man fiercely. "And what do we want with neighbours? Have we not done without them all our lives hitherto? Besides, this girl," he flashes round on Fragoletta as he says that, "is a spy—a mean, cursed, dodging spy! She belongs to a race I hate; and I forbid you to have word or greeting with her again! Do you hear?"

"Yes, I hear," answered the young

fellow calmly; "but what if I refuse to obey?"

"Refuse—to—obey!" the old man drops each word as if his bewildered senses could not take in their joint meaning. "You are mad—you forget to whom you are talking! Go! leave this place. To-morrow you will have regained your senses."

"Yes, go!" whispers Fragoletta entreatingly. "Do not anger him more."

"If I go," answers young Brooklyn, drawing himself up to his full height, and looking defiantly at his tyrannical relative, "it is simply to save you from further unpleasantness, Miss St. Quentin. I am more sorry than I can say that you should have been subjected to such insult."

He bows as he speaks and turns abruptly away, leaving the old man glaring and trembling there.

He comes a step nearer now, looking more like a wild beast than ever.

"So you will work discord between us, will you?" he says. "You had best beware! None cross my path but live to rue it!"

Fragoletta clings to me in terrified silence. Neither of us speaks.

"Where is your fine friend," he goes on maliciously—"Rayburne, as he calls himself? Why is not he here now to protect you—eh?"

"Rayburne!" I exclaim in amazement. "Do you know Major Rayburne?"

He laughs that harsh grating laugh which jars on my ears like the noise of rusty locks.

"Ay—ay," he nods; "I know him, better than he knows himself. As for you, spy," he continues, turning furiously on Fragoletta again, "beware how you

cross my path for the future. Tell what you discovered if you like, spread the news far and wide that the miser of Leathorpe keeps his treasures in the Abbey vaults; but when *he* seeks them to whom of right they belong, he will find you have lied to him. My vengeance will strike with a surer hand, and reach him through more tortuous paths, than you imagine. He is a Rayburne. Oh yes; he has not deceived you—there. Ha, ha! ha, ha!"

And with another peal of harsh, discordant laughter he vanishes as he had come.

Fragoletta turns her white face to mine.

"Is he not terrible?" she says slowly.

"He seems rather mad," I answer, laughing again. "What a lot of rubbish he did talk, to be sure; but, my dear

child, how have you offended him? He seems to have a particularly spiteful regard for your fair self."

"I—I cannot tell you," she falters; "only this, I surprised one of his secrets accidentally, and he has never forgotten or forgiven it. He frightened me nearly out of my wits then. I believe he would murder me if he could."

"He certainly looks well inclined that way," I answer.

And then, arm-in-arm, we leave the spot, and I make a mental resolve never to invade its sacred solitude again.

We pace up and down the garden-walks in the cool September dusk, talking in soft hushed voices of our adventure. I think Fragoletta is really alarmed. As for me, I am only curious. I try to get out of her what his reference to Major Rayburne meant, but she will say nothing

except that he started up suddenly before her that day of the picnic, and favoured the major and herself with a similar outburst to that which I had witnessed.

"I wonder whether he will bully that poor young grandson very much?" I say, laughing at the remembrance of the two faces. "Your love course is not going to run smooth, my dear."

"What do you mean?" she asks, flushing hotly.

"Only that this is the first seed of a pretty little romance sown between these two properties. That lonely youth evidently thinks you adorable; the unamiable grandparent is not quite of the same opinion. We will see who gets the best of the battle."

"You are talking nonsense, Clarice," she says coldly; "there is nothing of the kind possible or probable on either side."

"Speak for yourself, my dear," I answer. "As for me, I can see a little bit farther than you—if not through a stone wall, at least through a park-railing."

"I don't understand you," she says.

"Probably not; but Pyramus would," I tell her, laughing at her grave and troubled face.

CHAPTER III.

MORE EXTRACTS FROM CLARICE NORBURTON'S JOURNAL.

It is Sunday afternoon, and I have decoyed Fragoletta over to the Court in order to get her to accompany me to a new church I wish to go to. The ritual is supposed to be high. Everything is an innovation on the drowsy old-fashioned way the service is conducted at our parish church, and I am all anxiety to see it.

My uncle and aunt never go to evening service, but they have no objection to our doing so. I therefore bore down

upon the aunts this morning, and insisted upon taking Fragoletta back with me. She is to stop the night, and go home to-morrow morning.

At present she is engaged in reading sermons to Aunt Isabel. I know of old the somnolent tendency these sermons possess, and I told her to come up to me as soon as auntie had gone to sleep, and we would go out and sit under the cedar-tree. I have also asked her whether she has seen or heard any more of her neighbours since that memorable evening.

She says "No," and blushes so much that I become more convinced than ever I am right in my surmises respecting the romance.

Oh dear me, I hear her coming! I must put away my journal till to-night or to-morrow.

Fragoletta has gone home, and I fly to my book to put down our adventure of yesterday. Really the romance is progressing beautifully!

We walked to the church, as it was such a fine evening, and uncle sent over the footman as body-guard, because it would be dark coming home.

Fragoletta looked quite nice. She had a little black velvet *toque* on her head, and some of that brown dusky hair straying in soft little curls about her forehead, and a spray of white flowers at her throat as a relief to the dense black she still wears. As for myself, my bonnet was adorable, and so was my dress, but I am not going to bother about describing them. It isn't as if I were writing a book.

We reached the church, and I really was astonished. It wasn't half a bad

imitation of some of the London ones. There was an altar and candles on it, and a big crucifix, and flowers, and all the choir and the two clergymen marched in from the vestry two and two, and the service was intoned, though it was wretchedly done.

While they were singing the psalms, I heard the sound of a step—evidently that of a late comer. There was a halt —a whisper—and then who was ushered into our pew but young Brooklyn!

I glanced at Fragoletta. She was scarlet (she looks almost pretty when she has a colour).

The young man did not look a bit confused. Unfortunately I was next to him, and I am sure he was disgusted at the fact.

The service proceeded. The senior clergyman read the lessons as if each

sentence was a missile that he was hurling at us; then came more intoning, more singing of High-Church hymns, and last of all the sermon.

I looked at Fragoletta. She was sitting quite still with folded hands, and her great earnest eyes upturned to the preacher as if his hurled-out sentences were fraught with deepest moment.

At last it was over. My little friend came down from the clouds, and we filed slowly out of the hot, stuffy little building, to the sound of the "Agnus Dei," from Mozart's Twelfth Mass.

As we reached the porch, young Brooklyn advanced to us. We could not very well help shaking hands, but I saw how pale and troubled Fragoletta looked; in point of fact, so did he.

Our body-guard marched at a respectful distance behind, and we then sauntered

on up the white shaded road, and talked of the beauty of the evening, and everything, in fact, but just that one topic we wanted to talk of.

It came at last, though there had been a long pause, and during it Fragoletta apparently had made up her mind, for she said quietly to her companion:

"Do you think you ought to walk with us after what passed the other day?"

"Yes, I do," he answered firmly. "I am not a child to be dictated to any longer. There is nothing whatever that should prevent our acquaintance save prejudice and rancour on the part of my grandfather. He has no right to order my every action in such an arbitrary fashion, nor will I submit to it any longer."

I looked triumphantly at Fragoletta. What about the romance now? She did

not seem to heed me. Her face was quite pale, her brows were drawn together in a puzzled uneasy way; the eyes that looked up to him were full of fear.

"I do not think you are right," she said in her soft pretty voice.

He looked at her wistfully. I loitered behind. I saw I was not wanted just then.

"I hope you are not going to say I must not see you or speak to you again," he said at last. "Indeed, I could not promise—that."

"And why not?"

"Because my life is so bare and empty that I am loath to turn away from one spot of light. Do you remember what you told me when I first saw you—that you were sorry for me? Are you less compassionate now? Can you deny me a word, a look—when I have not one kind

voice to speak the one, nor a single human face that cares to give the other, in all the dead level monotony of my dreary life?"

"Oh hush!" she said earnestly. "I ought not to listen to you. I cannot help you, even if I would!"

"You can—you could; but I have no right to ask it. After all, I ought not to shadow your young life with any knowledge of the deep unhappiness that fills the lives of others."

"I know you are unhappy," she continued earnestly. "But it seems to me that a man can always carve out his own future—can overthrow the despotism of a tyranny that would hold a woman in life-long bondage. Can any wealth atone to you for your wasted youth, your bartered independence?"

"No," he answered bitterly, "it cannot.

But you forget—I am not as—other men."

The look with which he recalled his infirmity brought a hot shamed flush to her cheek. She was silent and embarrassed.

How completely they had both forgotten me! Really this "gooseberry" business was not at all an agreeable thing.

"You have brains and hands," she said presently. "Can anyone be quite helpless who has the mind to use the one, or the power to use the other?"

"But—if there be no need?"

"In that case," she said coldly, "why complain of unhappiness? If you are content to accept your life as it is, why rail against its obligations? As matters are, you owe obedience to your grandfather while his roof shelters you. I am the last person in the world to encourage your forgetfulness of that fact."

She looked round appealingly to me as she said those last words, and I resumed my place by her side.

I knew she was right, perfectly right; but I could never have had the courage to nip a promising flirtation in the bud so decidedly. And he was so handsome, and he looked so sad and pale in the moonlight; and, after all, his deformity was so slight, and he might grow out of it. But none of these things seemed to occur to Fragoletta.

She really is the oddest girl! I vouchsafed a word or two, but they were received with such unflattering indifference that I grew disgusted. We walked on up the narrow lane that was a short cut to the Court, and a very silent, uncomfortable trio we were.

"Do you always go to church?" I said at last. "I mean to St. Mary's."

"It is the first time I have been there," he said brusquely.

"It is our first visit also," I responded affably.

"Shall you go again?" he asked more eagerly, his eyes turning to Fragoletta's downcast face.

She looked quickly up at that question. "I don't think so," she said; "I prefer the parish church."

"And my grandfather objects to my going there, because he has quarrelled with Mr. Thornton."

"That is one of his pleasant little ways, isn't it," I remarked, "to quarrel with everybody? He will have to do it with himself soon, for there'll be no one else left."

"I think you would do him a great deal of good," he said, looking at me; "you are so frank and outspoken."

"Oh, I daresay we should quarrel like the Kilkenny cats," I said, laughing; "only, in our instance, there would be no *tale* even left to tell;" and I indulge in a fit of merriment at my own joke, which only brings the faintest quiver of a smile to the lips of my two companions.

"Our roads diverge here," he remarked presently, and the announcement brought us all to a standstill. "I—I am thankful for the accident which gave me the opportunity of seeing you again, Miss St. Quentin" (he quite ignored me). "I wish I might believe you would reconsider your determination."

"I cannot," she said firmly; "I shall never forget your grandfather's words, and to do behind his back what he has forbidden, must surely appear an ignoble proceeding to you."

He winced at her calm direct words.

"You are right, no doubt," he said; "but it seems hard."

She smiled with the most serene unconsciousness. "Hard! Why we are not even friends. You have only seen me three times."

"Four," he corrected. "You see I have a better memory than you. But my life holds so few pleasures, it is easy to reckon them up."

"What has become of your creeds and philosophies?" she asked coolly. "You told me they defied all lesser vanities—even earthly happiness, to rival them."

"Yes," he said simply; "but that was before I knew what earthly happiness might mean."

It was as good as a proposal really; and I standing there all the time, engrossed in the study of a wild wood-flower, which took eyes and ears away from

them! But I don't believe they were a bit grateful.

I think his last words brought some touch of consciousness even to her innocent mind, for her face looked disturbed, and her eyes drooped. There was a little embarrassed silence which I could have put an end to if I had liked, but their ingratitude did not deserve it. Fragoletta recovered herself at last, and held her hand shyly out.

"We might have been friends had not circumstances been against us," she said. "As it is, please let us say good-bye, and part. I could not, indeed I could not help you to deceive your grandfather."

"And will you never speak to me when we meet?" he sighed, growing very pale —so pale that I felt downright sorry for him, and angry with that cold little prude.

She looked embarrassed.

"It is hard to decide," she answered at last. "I do not want to be rude; but you, oh surely you must know whether it is right to continue an acquaintance that has been forbidden!"

"My friend is very straight-laced," I interposed; "and if she thinks a thing is right she will stick to it through thick and thin."

He sighed.

"I must accept your decision then," he said gloomily; "my only hope is that circumstances will not always be against us."

Then he shook hands with us both, raised his hat, and departed.

"Oh Fragoletta!" I cried, as I saw his figure rapidly vanishing in the distance, "how could you be so unkind? Poor Pyramus will break his heart."

"Please don't talk so foolishly, Clarice," she said entreatingly; "you know I have only done what is right."

"Right!" I exclaimed with lofty scorn; "the idea of stopping the growth of such a pretty idyllic romance, simply because it was right! My dear, how I pity your lovers!"

She coloured rosily.

"I don't want any; I hope I shall never have any," she said passionately. "When I think of art alone, I am happy. What have men ever done to those they love save spoil their lives? I am not thankless or indifferent, but I do not want any such thought to approach me. I have lost the most faithful and tender love I shall ever know, and I doubt if I shall ever be light of heart, or glad, as I was then. But when you speak of love so lightly, Clarice, it hurts me. I do not desire it; not in the

way you think; only, I suppose, you do not understand."

"I certainly do not," I answered, wondering why her voice grew so hopeless, her face so sad. "I take life lightly; believe me, dear, it is the wisest way; and as for love—well—I have had so much, and esteemed it so little, that really a heart more or less does not seem of much account to me. Men soon get over their fancies, only Pyramus is young and romantic, and there is something about you that a young lover would idealise—that he might not easily forget."

"Oh no," she said hurriedly, while the hot pained colour rose to her cheeks again; "I am not worth remembering. He cannot think of me in—in that way."

"Indeed, I am very much mistaken if he thinks of you in any other," I said.

But she was silent.

So, after all, the romance looks less promising than I imagined.

Fragoletta is really most provoking. The idea of a little minx of sixteen (she will be seventeen next month, though) acting in such a very decorous uncompromising manner! I thought she would like a little bit of fun like other girls; but no, those great serious eyes of hers look straight through at right or wrong, and no sophistries can dim them or make them turn aside.

If ever this girl does love, it will be life or death to her. I promise myself an interesting history when she falls a victim to the tender passion. I shall post up the entries in my journal with most scrupulous exactness, if only to have that episode led up to, and inscribed in it. What fun, when we are quite old women, to read this book, and see our youth before

us once more!—that is to say, if we ever become old women.

Fragoletta is just one of those "whom the gods love die young" sort of girls. She lives in a sort of isolation, the result of her own dreamy fancies, and that curious unyouthfulness which sets her apart from girlhood's frivolities and light-heartedness.

I suppose her great sorrow is in some measure accountable for this. She loved her father so very dearly — she was so much his companion and friend, that his death must have been a terrible blow. It is curious with what reverence and pride she enshrines his memory. He seems her beau-ideal of all that is high, and noble, and perfect in man!

He must have been a very different sort of father to mine. He is a fine breezy old gentleman, who kept us in

subjection in early youth by the constant enforcing of the wise king's principle, "Spare the rod and spoil the child!" There certainly was no spoiling of us, though I doubt whether the great principle has turned us out very much better than other families who have been spared its forcible demonstration.

My brothers are fairly emancipated from the Home Rule, but Valerie and I and our two younger sisters have quite enough of it; in fact I believe the boys' share is kindly made over to us, for time often hangs heavily on the worthy old gentleman's hands, and he employs his leisure in routing us up out of our hiding-places and giving us lectures an hour long on the idleness, uselessness, and frivolity of maidenhood. No wonder that Valerie and I have made up our minds to escape from this bondage at the

earliest opportunity. But Valerie declares I have basely deserted my colours since I refused the gouty old earl. To think I might have been Countess of Izledean by this time! Ah, Harry, you have much to answer for. Can a lifetime of devotion be too high a payment for the sacrifice I have made?

CHAPTER IV.

A WEDDING IN PROSPECT.

I CAME to stay with Aunt Isabel for a month or two. It is now January, and I am still here. Poor auntie fell very ill, and all through the long cold winter months I stayed to nurse her, and the people at home had no objection to my doing so—being, in fact, in a state of jubilant gratification, for Valerie has at last succeeded in making a great conquest.

From all accounts I don't think much of the young man; even his *fiancée's* description is not flattering; and he has

red hair! But to counterbalance that defect he has a large rent-roll, a free and unencumbered property in Herefordshire, a town-house, and rejoices in the name of Sir Richard Daventry. "Lady Daventry!" It really doesn't sound half bad. Valerie says she is very glad I am not at home, as I should be sure to laugh at him and torment her. She says, too (that is rather mean of her, I think), that I should very likely step in and bewilder the poor young man into that doubtful state of "how happy could I be with either," as I have had such a knack of doing with her other admirers. However, this one is safely caught, and they are to be married in March. It is now the middle of January, so it won't be a very long engagement. The head of the family is in a state of gracious *bonhomie*. Fancy that! The trousseau

is to be ungrudgingly paid for. Wonder on wonders! Everything is to be done in the most approved and orthodox fashion, and I am to be sure and come home in time to choose the bridesmaids' dresses! Won't I just!

A happy thought has just struck me. I will insist on Fragoletta coming too, and swelling the bridal *cortége*, as *The Court Journal* says. I am sure a touch of gaiety would do her good. Besides, her picture will be finished by that time. She is actually going to send it up for the Academy! I have been doing model for her lately, though she coolly told me she was going to idealise my face —it wanted soul and feeling! I have not seen her picture for a long time. She wants me to wait till it is quite finished.

The romance came to an abrupt con-

clusion. One morning we were startled by hearing that young Brooklyn had left the Hall and gone up to London. Since that day his fate is a sealed book to us. As for the old man, I have caught sight of him once or twice, and he looks more grimy and horrible than ever. People say he is fast going out of his mind.

January 16*th.*— . . . . I was pottering about in the grounds this morning, revelling in the cool soft wind and the beautiful sunshine, actually trying to persuade myself that the crocuses in the dark-brown borders were pushing their way through the earth. I was surprised to hear the sound of wheels—still more surprised to see the Wyefield carriage coming up the drive, and Fragoletta and her aunts alighting from it.

I rushed back to the house immediately,

and found them all in the morning-room with Aunt Isabel. After the usual greetings I drew Fragoletta aside, and communicated to her my plan of taking her back to London with me when I went.

"And the Academy opens in May, you know," I said to her joyfully; "and as the wedding won't be till the very end of March, that will just give you a nice two months' visit. Should you like it?"

"Very much!" she said, in that soft voice of hers that no excitement seems ever to make eager. "But——"

"I will have no 'buts,'" I said peremptorily. "I have set my heart upon your coming, and come you must."

"If Aunt Charlotte does not object."

"A fig for Aunt Charlotte and her objections!" I cried. "I shall soon demolish them like so many nine-pins."

And without wasting time on more

words I marched over to the citadel and fairly took it by storm, so that, after a quarter-of-an-hour's argument and discussion, she gave in and I was triumphant.

"You look as lugubrious as the man who said 'Life would be endurable but for its pleasures,'" I said, laughing, to Fragoletta, as we went down to the carriage after luncheon.

"I am very pleased to go," she said quickly; "and I think it is most kind and good of you to wish to give me such a pleasure; I do, indeed."

"Then why the gloom on that fair brow?" I asked theatrically.

"Was it gloomy?" she said with a faint smile.

"Well, graver than the occasion warranted. Fragoletta, when I was your age, I would have run and jumped, and

screamed with delight at the prospect of a London season."

"But you do not expect me to do that?"

"No," I said, looking at the thoughtful calmness of her face. "It would be incompatible with that devotion to art which is to fill and satisfy your whole life."

"You are laughing at me," she said, looking up at my face.

"No, my dear," I said; "I was only wondering who will overthrow that devotion and raise another altar where your heart will worship."

She flushed so strangely that I was surprised, accustomed as I had become to see the blood fly into that pale, clear, creamy skin, which of late had lost all the sallowness of delicate health.

"That will never be," she said hurriedly,

and with a little sharp catching of her breath.

"We shall see," I answered oracularly. "By-the-bye, I have not told you my last and best piece of news. Who do you think is coming home from India?"

She grew so deadly pale that I stared at her in amazement.

"Not Major——" she began, recovering herself by a great effort, and fixing her eyes on me with all her heart in their eager bewildered gaze.

"Yes," I said gleefully. "Major—for he is major now—Major Ross—my Harry, dear! There have been some steps, or promotions, owing to this war, and he is no longer a captain, and he will be here in April or May. Isn't that delightful?"

"Yes," she said, turning her head away.

"I am so glad, so very glad, for your sake. How happy you must be!"

"Happy!" I exclaimed rapturously. "I should think I was! Why, I haven't known what to do with myself this morning since I had the letter. I have been quite wild!"

We were close to the carriage now, and the good old ladies were chatting away to Aunt Isabel. Fragoletta put her hand on my arm. It actually trembled.

"You said something about—about steps," she faltered. "Is it—I mean, how have they been gained?"

"Oh, through death, I suppose," I answered carelessly.

How could I be sorry for what was Harry's gain?

"*Deaths*! Whose?"

I was so startled by her white face, and

the agony of dread in her eyes, that I could only stare at her.

"Well, what frightens you?" I said wonderingly. "You don't know anybody out there."

Then a light dawned upon me. Why, how foolish, how blind, how obtuse I had been! I seized her hands and looked down into her pale and troubled face.

"Did you think Harry was promoted owing to Major Rayburne's death?" I said. "Did I not tell you he has been promoted too? They speak so highly of his bravery, Harry says. He is Colonel Rayburne now."

The revulsion of feeling was so great that blinder eyes than mine could have read the poor child's secret. Her eyes filled with great tears, her lips quivered and trembled. She snatched her hands from

mine, and covered her face with them. But I saw the shamed crimson creeping to her very brow, and I knew the truth at last.

Astonishment robbed me of speech. I saw her get into the carriage, and heard the interchange of farewells, and I believe I answered them too in some dim mechanical fashion; but all the time I was saying to myself, over and over again:

"So it is *he* whom she loves!"

Alas for the romance! What will become of it now?

March 1*st.* — I have not written anything in my journal for a long time, but I am going to resume my habit now. As this is the first day of a new month, I feel it is a suitable and becoming opportunity to make a good resolution and keep it.

We arrived in Berkeley Square, where my parental domicile is situated, last evening, and Fragoletta was introduced to them all. The sight of such a large family seemed rather to surprise her, especially when, after dinner, we all congregated together in our own particular "den," to retail the various occurrences that had taken place during my absence. We were not wanted in the drawing-room till nine, for our father had some old fogies to talk politics with in the dining-room, and mamma was sure to be dozing over a novel, and from time immemorial it had been our custom to meet in "the den" at this hour whenever it was possible to do so.

We had disposed ourselves in such various attitudes as seemed to us best, but Fragoletta, being a visitor, was installed in the one armchair we possessed.

A bright fire burnt in the grate, the curtains were drawn, and the room looked really very cosy and snug.

"After all, it is nice to be home," I said, drawing my chair near to Valerie, and slipping my hand into her warm soft clasp. "And so you are really engaged, young woman? How do you feel? Any different?"

"Don't you see how she has aged," put in Grey (my eldest brother, at home on leave from Aldershot). "I saw a gray hair in her head only this morning. When you see him, my dear, you'll wonder she has not 'turned all white in a single night,' like the being immortalised in that poem. I forget the author, and I forget the rest of the verses, but the quotation is all right."

"Now that will do," exclaimed Valerie, laughing; "he is my property, and I

won't have him abused. After all, it's much better to marry an ugly man—one needn't be jealous or afraid of other women falling in love with him."

"'Sweet are the uses of adversity,'" quoted Grey, whose love of teasing had by no means ceased with his approach to manhood.

"I had better marry an ugly girl on the same principle," answered Cecil (the youngest brother, a youth of great beauty, who had just obtained a berth in the Foreign Office, and thought no small beer of himself in consequence).

"Yes, if you can find one to have you," I answered. "Why, even ugly girls can't stand conceit. For my part, I would sooner marry a man as ugly as sin, than a 'curled darling' of the stamp you imitate so religiously."

"A Daniel come to judgment," laughed

Grey. "Pray, Miss Clarry, where is your pretty fair share of that same quality gone to? Have you left it at Woodfield?"

"Yes, I made a present of it to Uncle George when I left."

"And how is the interesting vicar?" persisted Grey.

I grew scarlet.

"He is quite well," I said shortly.

"And our dear nephew, our adopted son," persisted the youth, folding his hands and glancing sanctimoniously up at the ceiling. "He also, I trust, enjoys good health. He has not been wounded in battle, or become a victim to malaria, or married a Begum, has he?"

My sense of the ludicrous overcame my wrath at this juncture, and I laughed outright in concert with the rest of the group. The give-and-take system of busi-

ness had long been established between us, and it does not do to allow each other the pleasure of perceiving that "the shafts at random sent" have been fortunate enough to find a target.

"Did you have any fun down there this time?" asked sixteen-year-old Lottie. "Any balls or dances?"

"No," I said. "You forget Aunt Isabel was ill all the winter."

"And how do you like Leathorpe, Miss St. Quentin?" asked Grey politely, as he remembered the fact of our visitor's presence, and turned his attention to her.

"Very much," she said readily. "At least, since Clarice has been there; she keeps us all alive."

"I daresay she does," he answered; "she always had a pretty good knack that way. Did you miss the governor, Clarry?"

"Indeed I did," I said, laughing. "But it was a loss for which I was speedily consoled. How has he been, by-the-way?"

"Not so nice and breezy as usual. The fact of having a daughter about to be 'my lady,' acts like a sop to Cerberus, and when he begins to bark, we throw it at him instantly."

"Poor Valerie!" I said, looking up at her beautiful laughing face, "and you've really made up your mind at last!"

"If she'd had a chance of making it up before, she'd not have waited for Sir Redhead," remarked Cecil coolly.

"A lot you know about her chances — or mine either!" I retorted scornfully.

"Oh no, we never mention them," said Grey, "nor Lottie's either—nor Mina's—poor little Mina! We are very like the

'modest violets,' we are, and 'hang our heads and bend our stalks with every wish to hide from view.' Such is our amiable weakness as a family; though unbeknown to the many, it is respected and valued as a virtue by the few!"

"You really are too absurd," I said. "I thought, now you were growing up to years of discretion, you would have more sense!"

"'When the wine's in the wit's out.' For wine, read Clarice, and solve the problem," retorted Grey, rising to get a light for his cigar. "My dear child, I always suit my manners to my company."

"You are impressing Fragoletta with a favourable opinion of the youthful members of our British Army," I said scornfully.

"Your friend has doubtless been told by you that she must take us as we are.

This is the green-room of our private life. Here we divest ourselves of paint, and powder, and trappings, and appear our simple homely selves. If Miss St. Quentin prefers us in our artificial condition, she knows where to find us."

"I prefer you in the natural one, I am afraid," laughed Fragoletta merrily. "I had no idea you could talk so much, for one thing. You were all so quiet at dinner."

"Yes; for our Ancient Mariner had fixed us with his 'glittering eye,'" said Grey solemnly. "You, perhaps, did not observe that peculiarity of his. Ah, you will be initiated into it before long."

"Don't imagine father is quite such an ogre," I said to Fragoletta; "Grey always exaggerates everything!"

"Except his own excellence," calmly put in that incorrigible youth.

"But, like good wine, that needs no bush."

"We certainly are remarkably modest in our opinions of our own merits," said Valerie.

"As for you, my dear," said Grey, "your diet at present consists of sugar. When you have had a surfeit of sweets, come to me. I will add the judicious drops of acid that shall preserve you from the cloying and satiating effect of such unwholesome food."

"I should know better than to come to you for anything except impudence," she retorted.

"Hark! there is a knock at the door," said Lottie, springing up.

"Look at Val — celestial rosy-red, as is her beloved one's hair!" said Cecil mischievously.

"Enter—a lover!" cried Grey theatri

cally, as the door was opened, and my future brother-in-law appeared in the entrance.

"Valerie is quite well; we have taken every care of her, Sir Richard," said that incorrigible Grey; "and as the eldest member of the family, allow me to present you with another prospective sister-in-law. You see, the cry is, 'Still they come!'"

"And is this another sister?" asked Sir Richard, as, after shaking hands with me, he noticed Fragoletta.

"Oh no — that is a friend of mine," I said—"Miss St. Quentin" (he bowed). "I have brought her up from the country," I continued. "She is going to have a peep at town life and gaiety."

"As exemplified by a wedding," said Grey, *sotto voce.*

I glanced warningly at him.

"Is it not time to go to the drawing-room?" I asked.

"I am afraid it is," answered Sir Richard, with a good-humoured smile. "It really seems a pity to disturb you all — you look so comfortable — but your mother sent me with a message to that effect."

"And it leaves us no choice but to obey," I remarked ruefully; and two by two we filed out of our "den," leaving the lovers considerately to the last.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE ROW.

March 2*nd*.—The *fiancé* is not a bad sort of fellow after all. He is generosity itself for one thing, and after the way we have been screwed and pinched all our lives we can appreciate that trait in a man's character most heartily.

He and Valerie seem to get on very well. I really don't see why they shouldn't make a very happy couple. She went out riding in the Row with him this morning, and Fragoletta and I, and Grey, followed on foot later. It was a lovely morning, mild

as spring, and sweet with cool air and living sunshine. The Row was tolerably well filled, though the season had scarcely commenced; and it amused me to see Fragoletta's wondering eyes as we passed group after group—aristocratic, plutocratic, plebeian, as the case might be; for if there is one place where one sees a more incongruous mixture of ranks and classes than another, it is our famous English Row.

Fragoletta herself was looking very sweet. She was dressed in black velvet, with some rich old lace at her throat, and a bunch of lilies-of-the-valley nestling in the soft folds. I never saw a girl so altered as she is. She has grown taller, though she will never be anything but *petite*, and her skin, that I thought so dark and sallow once, has now only that clear creamy pallor which shows every flush of colour and

emotion. Her eyes were always beautiful. Valerie says they would make even a plain girl lovely, and Fragoletta is decidedly not *that.* I saw many people look at her; but she seemed quite unconscious that she was attracting attention. The scene was new and strange, and she was taking it all in with that absorbing interest which she seems to feel for life in its various phases. Probably she saw things that I never saw or dreamt of, and idealised faces that, for all their loveliness, I knew to be but whited sepulchres. But I was not going to disturb her illusions.

We girls of the nineteenth century may be fast and go-ahead, but that is the fault of the age we live in, the lives we lead, the daily literature we peruse; and, fast as we are, I think there is not one of us who does not reverence innocence and purity of mind

when it does exist, and who would not shrink from destroying it by any word or deed.

Therefore, when Fragoletta went off into raptures over the lovely Lady Hilda D'Aubigné, and said her face was like an angel's, I did not enlighten her as to the numerous "affairs" that angelic lady had had during her two seasons, or how the united intercession of all her relatives and friends had been barely sufficient to keep her husband from exposing her in the Divorce Court.

"And is she married?" asked my little friend in astonishment; "she looks so young—such a girl!"

"Yes, she has been married two years," I answered.

"And that handsome man bending over her so admiringly is her husband, I suppose?"

Grey gave a slight guffaw, but I glanced warningly at him.

"No," I said, "her husband is away in Norway—at present."

"Oh," said Fragoletta in surprise; "then that man must have been her brother, or some relation?"

"German cousin, I believe," said Grey coolly: "there are plenty of them about."

"And who is that magnificent-looking personage?" she asked eagerly, as a tall imposing figure in velvet and sables passed us. "Some great lady?"

"She is an actress," said Grey. "You would think her a duchess, at least, wouldn't you? Unfortunately our aristocrats don't always look what they are."

"There comes Val," I said presently. "She sees us; she is stopping. Let us go and speak to her."

The riders drew up close to the railings,

and we stood chatting there for some moments.

Valerie always looks lovely on horseback, and her *fiancé's* hair does not seem quite so red when he has his hat on.

"What a lot of people there are here to-day," said Sir Richard. (Val calls him Dick; I think I must do the same.) "Have you seen anyone you know?"

"Lots," I answered comprehensively. "What a needless question to ask! Do you forget I have been out three seasons?"

"Have you, indeed? You see I have not heard much about you yet. Our acquaintance only dates from yesterday. Have you seen the new beauty of the season?"

"No; who is she?" I asked eagerly.

"A Miss Warwick. They say she is perfection. I haven't seen her yet. They talk of her at the clubs; but her people are

not going to cheapen her attractions by letting her be seen too often."

"You have not seen anything like this before, have you?" asked Valerie of Fragoletta.

"No; it is very amusing," she says, lifting her great eyes admiringly to Val's face.

What a worshipper of beauty this girl is!

"Amusing! I find it deuced slow," muttered Grey. "I shouldn't mind if I was mounted, but pottering about in this fashion isn't in my line at all."

"I think you are very rude," remarked Val. "Miss St. Quentin won't have a favourable opinion of the manners of young England from the specimen you have given her."

"Miss St. Quentin is doubtless as tired as I am," he said, "only politeness forbids

her confessing it. The Row is a treadmill that only those who are in the prison-house of fashion make a pretence of enjoying."

"Fragoletta," I exclaimed suddenly, "look there!"

She started and looked round.

A young man was hurrying past the crowd of fashionable loungers—a young man, shabby as to dress, indifferent enough in appearance; but his eyes fell on the girl's face, and his own changed immediately.

In a moment he was at her side.

"*You* here!" he cried breathlessly.

She had flushed to her very brow in her usual foolish fashion.

I tremble when I think how many people those blushes may mislead.

"Yes," she said at last, when he had dropped her hand, and stood gazing at her as if utterly oblivious of time, place, and

surroundings. "I came up to London yesterday. I am staying with Miss Norburton."

"You have forgotten me, I suppose, Mr. Brooklyn?" I remarked coolly.

He turned at once.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered; "I was so utterly astonished."

"We heard you had come up to London," I said affably. "Do you make a long stay here?"

"For good, I believe," he answered. "I —I have left Leathorpe."

"Did you also receive sentence of banishment?" I said, laughing. "Why, who will your grandfather have left to quarrel with?"

"I could not bear the idleness, the dependence," he said, with a timid glance at Fragoletta. "I thought I would try what I could do for myself."

"And have you succeeded?" I asked, with some curiosity.

"Yes, tolerably. I have taken to literature. I write for newspapers and magazines —in fact, anything that I can get."

"But that is not very lucrative, is it?" I asked in surprise.

"No," he said, colouring; "but everything must have a beginning. Perhaps some day I shall make a name—who knows?"

"And be a celebrated author," interposed Fragoletta. "I hope you will succeed. It is a noble ambition."

His eyes spoke his thanks so eloquently that I really grew quite uncomfortable. How Grey would quiz us about our country friend, I thought. He looked so shabby and so poor, but his face was handsomer than ever. It had acquired a manliness—a purpose, so to speak—that took away from

the somewhat effeminate character of its beauty.

"You must come and see us," I said hastily. "This is my brother," introducing Grey, who bowed somewhat coldly. "We live at 16, Berkeley Square. I am sure mamma will be pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Thank you," he said eagerly; "you are very kind. I shall be most happy to come."

He looked at Fragoletta as he spoke. Her eyes were on the ground. It was impossible to tell whether she was pleased or the reverse.

"Well, good-bye for the present," I said, seeing he made no effort to move on.

I held out my hand, and he shook it; Fragoletta did the same, but in an embarrassed uncomfortable way, unlike her

usual calm self-possession. Grey bowed, and then he went on, after a parting nod to Val and Dick, who cantered off together.

"I don't think much of your friend," said Grey superciliously. "Where did you pick him up?"

"He is Fragoletta's friend," I said, laughing. "He is—or rather was, her nearest neighbour. I believe it is entirely owing to her counsel and direction that he has asserted his independence, and come up here to earn his bread. Poor fellow!"

"Oh Clarice, don't!" exclaimed Fragoletta earnestly. "You know it is not true!"

"It looks remarkably like it," I said. "Your words took speedy effect, at all events."

"He looks rather out at elbows," said Grey. "I hope he will have a decent coat on when he calls."

Fragoletta turned quickly on him.

"Is the coat of more importance in your mind than the wearer?" she asked scornfully. "Were he in rags he would be a gentleman still."

"Yes, of course I know," stammered Grey, looking rather foolish. "I did not mean anything disparaging to your friend, only the governor's awfully particular, and——"

"Then your sister should not have invited him," she said coldly.

"Grey, how can you be so foolish?" I interposed. "Mr. Brooklyn comes of a good old family, and he is heir to an enormous property. What he may choose to do now does not affect him socially or individually. I am surprised you can be so snobbish."

He darted an angry glance at me, but as we could not very well indulge in one of our quarrels in such a public position, he had to pocket the affront in sulky silence.

His ill-temper, however, spoiled our morning, for Fragoletta looked disturbed and uncomfortable, and I could not make her laugh and talk as I wished.

How tiresome these boys are, to be sure, with their airs and nonsense!

We went home to luncheon. Then followed an afternoon of shopping, which seemed a species of martyrdom to Fragoletta.

A few people dropped in to five-o'clock tea to congratulate Val, and hear about the wedding. Dick did not turn up till dinner-time; he was to accompany us to the theatre afterwards, and that being over, "to home and to bedde," *à la* Pepys.

Sunday, March 5th.—Every day I have been expecting to hear that young Brooklyn has called, but he was not, apparently, in such a hurry to accept my invitation as

I had been to give it. However, this afternoon he did turn up. I was so glad. I had been sitting over the fire shivering and yawning alternately, for our erratic climate has thought better of its good-nature, and the last few days have been cold, bleak, and windy, and altogether horrible.

Grey need not have been alarmed about the coat, for the young fellow looked very nice, and I was glad to perceive that his lameness seemed much better. My modest violet of a friend welcomed him very cordially, and he stayed half-an-hour, chatting with us both. Then mamma came in, and I introduced him, and to my surprise she invited him to a little party we are having next Thursday. He accepted at once, and without any *mauvaise honte*. I was surprised. Surely he can't dance at all, and it will be very slow for him. Oh,

but I suppose he will be content to gaze at his idol!

Truly a man in love is an object of compassion.

"What do you think now, my dear?" I asked Fragoletta after he had gone.

We were sitting alone together, mamma having retired to her boudoir, and Dick and Val to some other region. Grey was out, and the young fry were amusing themselves in "the den."

"What do you think of my prophecy now?" I continued. "Isn't Pyramus coming out strong?"

"Do you think so, really—really?" she asked, in the utmost distress.

"Don't you!" I said, laughing at her earnestness.

"Oh, I hope not. I am sure it cannot be what you say," she went on rapidly. "Naturally he would like to come and

see us, because he knows hardly anyone in London, and it is very lonely here. But that is all!"

"It will not be *all* very long," I said oracularly. "What should you do if he proposed?"

She flushed crimson, as if I had said something very dreadful.

"He would not—he could not!" she said in great agitation. "Such an idea would not enter his head."

"It has not only entered it, but taken such deep root there that he is working and living up to it alone," I said quietly. "The poor boy is over head and ears in love with you, my dear. If you don't care for him, let him see it as soon and as mercifully as you can. You are no mere abstract form of worship to him, but the embodiment of a poetic ideal. Do not his poems tell you that? Half their beauty

springs from the melancholy of an uncertain and absorbing passion, and you have inspired it!"

"He is very clever," she said sadly, as she glanced at the magazines on the table by her side. "I had no idea he could write so beautifully."

"Or that you could inspire such sentiments?" I asked, wondering how one could be so wise and yet so ignorant as this girl was.

"I have told you before," she said sadly, "that of love and lovers I cannot think in your light and careless fashion. If I could go through life without either I would; for love is cruel often, and curses more than it blesses."

"No you would not," I said gravely. "No woman would. It is against nature —against the very core and essence of our being. And if love be cruel, as you say,

and stabs the heart that once it blessed—well, we weep—and mourn a little, and then—forget."

"Forget?" she said sadly. "Is that so easy a thing?"

"To most women, yes," I answered, wondering a little why I had found it so hard, despite my volatile and capricious temperament.

"I should not be one of those," she said, the thoughtful calmness of her face changing to a tremulous and eager longing.

And I, remembering my discovery, knew that she was right—that her heart held a grand and patient faithfulness I could not fathom or understand, and that, little as she thought of love, she yet had learnt the very core and centre of its teaching—fidelity.

I never mentioned his name, nor did

she. I doubt even if she knew that I had guessed her secret. At times I felt so sorry for her; for what could her love bring save only suffering to herself? It never seemed possible that he could care for her with all that difference in their years. And how could an empty feeling satisfy her heart and its passionate capacity for loving?

Art would not content her always. The abstract beauty she saw and worshipped in the world around would not fill her soul with the warmth of human love. She would pass from youth to womanhood, missing all the time a certain fulness and content that could only come with the smile and the kiss of a lover. It was not natural to her, nor indeed to any woman; and it seemed to set her apart in an isolation which I would

have gladly altered had it been in my power. But I knew it was not, and I felt so sure that of love for her *he* had never thought.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ROMANCE PROGRESSES.

March 9th.—Our dance last night was very pleasant. We were only thirty altogether. We had music first, and Fragoletta electrified them all with her singing. In deference to our wishes she had laid aside her black dress, and wore white with knots of black ribbon here and there.

I cannot describe how she looked. I suppose no one would have called her beautiful, but there was something about her which made us all look commonplace

in our satins and laces and fripperies, and there was a calm composure in her manner quite different to the flattered vanity and excitement of most *débutantes.*

Pyramus came of course; he had eyes and ears for no one else but her. He did not dance at all (of course he could not, owing to his lameness), but he watched her with an absorbed and intent interest that carried its own meaning to more than one of those around.

"So your little friend has a lover?" my mother said to me. "It would be a good match for her, would it not?"

"I believe so," I said, "unless he has quarrelled with his grandfather. He is the heir of Leathorpe Hall, and according to rumour, the old squire has saved up no end of money."

"But has he quarrelled with him?" she asked. "It seems odd that he should be

now working for his bread if he has such an heirship before him."

"Oh, what does it matter?" I said impatiently. "If he is as rich as Crœsus it won't make any difference to Fragoletta. She will never have him."

"And why?" exclaimed mamma, raising her gentle eyes in astonishment to my face.

"Oh, because she does not care about him," I said.

"Doesn't care about him!" she repeated slowly. "Is there anyone else, then?"

"That is so likely," I said ironically. "She is barely seventeen, and has been buried alive in that dull little hole, where a man is as wonderful a sight as an—an aloe!" not being able to think of anything very rare by way of comparison.

"She is a very charming girl, Clarice, and so accomplished!"

"Accomplished!" I exclaimed. "Wait

till you see her picture! It is wonderful. You would never believe a girl had painted it."

"Does she get on well with her aunts?"

"Yes; now she does. I don't think Miss St. Quentin (the eldest of the two old maids) cared about having her at first. She told Aunt Isabel it would be a great responsibility. Such nonsense! There was never a quieter, simpler-minded girl than Fragoletta."

"You seem very fond of her!"

"I am," I said heartily. "It is not often I take to girls; as a rule, I dislike them; but I have never met one like Fragoletta. I don't believe I ever shall again."

"She seems enjoying herself," continued the mother, her eyes following the floating graceful little figure through the mazes of the waltz she was dancing.

"I hope she does," I said. "It is her first experience of an English party. I should like it to be a pleasant one."

Then my partner came to claim me, and I was whirled off into the throng of dancers.

Later on I was sitting down in a cool corner of the room, listening to the somewhat vapid remarks of a languid youth of eighteen summers, who was trying to impress me with an idea of his oldness, and failing most lamentably, when Fragoletta and her Pyramus came and sat down close beside me.

I got rid of my companion by a request for an ice, and so became an auditor of their *tête-à-tête*.

"So your picture is finished?" he said softly.

"Yes; the frame is to come to-morrow. You may see it then," she said, the colour

flushing her cheeks with warmth and excitement.

"I shall be glad to do that," he said simply. "It seems wonderful to think those little hands can do such work. I had no idea you were an artist."

"I am hardly that," she answered, "save in love and reverence for art."

"Does it content you—does it fill your life—your heart? They say, you know, that all artists and poets are mad, more or less, because they see and hear what no one else in the world can."

"I suppose they do seem mad to the many," she answered gravely. "It is the penalty they pay for the absorbing nature of their pursuits. The ideal they strive to reach is so much brighter, lovelier, more divine, than the real that is offered them."

"You are so young to have thoughts like these," he said, looking at her with

a sort of wonder in his eyes. "Do you remember when I saw you first? I often think of it. You were just holding the boughs aside, and your hat had fallen off, and your eyes were so full of wonder, I thought you were a child straying into some new and unknown region. And when you spoke, how astonished I was!"

"You must have thought me very odd," she said, laughing.

"It seems a long time ago, now, and yet it is but a few months," he said, looking at her wistfully; "but those months have made a wonderful difference to you."

"I am glad of that," she said, moving restlessly, as if the look in his eyes troubled her. "I should not like to be a child always."

"You are happy, are you not?" he said presently. "Not so happy as when you were in Florence, of course; but, still

happier than when you came first to Leathorpe."

"I am content," she said, flushing a little. "I suppose one is not ever really happy in this world; there is always something wanting."

"Yes," he said, his face growing very pale; "there is always something wanting, and all our lives we seek it, but find it either too late, or not at all."

"Does one never find it in time?" she asked hesitatingly.

"So rarely, that for one who makes the discovery a million fail. 'Give us happiness' has been the cry of humanity since the world existed; it will be its cry till the world exists no more."

"Nay, that is too sad to believe," she said gently; "somewhere in every life it must surely be. How else could we endure and suffer the burden of years?"

"Because, as it eludes our grasp, we still pursue it. It is a will-o'-the-wisp that takes many forms and shapes; for the young, the old, the grave, the gay, the student, the idler, the artist, the divine, it has a different aspect; but though it cheats the eye, it cannot satisfy the heart. Perchance the poets are right who tell us the only portal to it is the one we are most loath to take—death."

"You are enough to make anyone commit suicide the way you talk?" I exclaimed at this juncture, as I sprang up and confronted this horrible young cynic. "Pray do you always entertain your partners in this fashion? If so, never ask me to dance with you!"

"I could not do that, however much I wished it," he said, in that low melancholy voice that always made me sad to hear. "You forget I never dance."

I coloured hotly.

"I beg your pardon," I said. "Well, after all, there are better things in life than that. I don't think you miss much."

"Nor did I," he said softly, but involuntarily his eyes turned to her, "until to-night."

She grew very pale, and looked appealingly to me. I came to the rescue in my usual philanthropic fashion:

"Have you had any supper?" I asked. "No—then come along, I am dying for some. Mr. Brooklyn, you shall take us both."

And during supper I took very good care that there should be no more talk of happiness being a myth, or the only way of reaching it being "through the portals of death!" What a dreadful lover this young man is! Why, I should

die of fright and low spirits if I had much of his conversation. I have just written it down as I heard it, to show what an odd pair they are. I could not talk in such fashion to anyone I know; and as for happiness—well, the world is a nice enough place, and life has many pleasures, and when one is young, and has a fair face and plenty of lovers, why, what more is wanted?

Fragoletta, of course, talks of art as a divine thing, and dreams of all sorts of impossible delights in that serious, impassioned, picturesque, fanciful way of hers; but I am but a commonplace mortal, and can do very well without such dreams. Are any dreams worth the full living reality of life? I think not.

The days have drifted on, and I have little to chronicle save the endless shop-

ping, the constant arrival of presents. We seem to be involved in clouds of silks and laces and haberdashery. Val takes it all very coolly. Her wedding-dress came home last night, and we tried it on her in mother's dressing-room. The Brussels lace is a present from an old aunt of the bridegroom (his only female relative). Val looked lovely in her glistening satin robe and filmy veil. If Dick oughtn't to be proud of such a wife I should like to know who ought! We all surround her in an admiring crowd. Fragoletta looks at her as if she were a vision from another world. She seems to think a sort of sacredness enfolds her in her new character—something that sets her apart from the rest of us, and invests her with a species of awe.

I think we were all a little out of spirits to-night. We have never been

separated yet (till Grey got his commission), and this first break-up in the family seemed rather trying. Val was quite tearful, despite her glistening finery, and that serene consciousness of looking well in it that should support the spirit of any woman. Mother had been dissolving into tears at all times during the day. I, not being one of the lachrymose order of women, looked fairly composed, I flatter myself, and tried to raise the family spirits to their normal state. If I succeeded badly it was not my fault. The bridesmaids' dresses were laid out on the couch—Fragoletta's, Lottie's, and mine. They were cream-colour, with touches of deep rich red, and we had large Rubens hats with deep red feathers. All the bridesmaids (six in number) being dark, except myself, I was completely in the minority as to choice of colour. Besides,

as the weather was still bleak and chilly, Val declared we should look more comfortable in a warm bright hue than in any pale or neutral tints.

Altogether, I have no doubt we shall make a very imposing spectacle. I only wish Harry was here to be present (and take a lesson). He ought to be home by this time. I find by the *Gazette* that I made no mistake as to his rank. He really is Major Ross now. I wonder how he looks, or if India has changed him! I do hope not, for he was one of the nicest fellows possible. But of course I should never have liked him had he *not* been so.

The weeping and mourning ceased at last, and we all went into the drawing-room, where Dick was sitting in a fidget of nervousness and impatience. I do wonder how he will go through the cere-

mony to-morrow! Poor old Dick! He has given each of us a lovely bracelet! I am glad of that, for I hate lockets. Val has a diamond necklace. Lucky Val! Harry will never be able to give me such presents, I know; but then, on the other hand, Harry is—oh, ten thousand times nicer than Sir Richard Davenant. Now I am not going to write any more till I can describe the wedding.

CHAPTER VII.

FOR HONOUR'S SAKE.

March 29*th.* — What a day! Bustle, hurry, confusion; and, as if we had not enough to do, and sufficient excitement to fill our minds, who should arrive, just after our return from church, but Harry Ross! Weren't we all astonished! He was so pale, and looked so delicate, that I could hardly keep from crying. He has been very badly wounded, poor fellow, and still suffers a great deal. He received a most warm greeting from the governor, who up to the present moment has been

beaming with amiability; and as for me—well, I think I did for once lose my head a little, and let him see he was not forgotten, despite his fears and my fickleness.

The wedding went off splendidly. Harry, in spite of being an unexpected guest, made one of the best speeches at the breakfast. Dick's was the most lamentable failure possible, and kept poor Val in agonies of nervousness. However, it was over at last. The bride retired to put on her travelling-dress, the carriage stood at the door, and after making her tearful and voluminous farewells, poor Val got in beside her beaming and radiant lord, and was driven off, followed by showers of rice and slippers.

"I don't think I shall ever get married," I said, turning away with a doleful sigh. "It must be intensely disagreeable."

"Oh, you will change your mind when

you play the chief part in the ceremony," whispered that audacious Harry, who somehow seemed to be always by my side.

Of course I did not make him any answer.

One by one the guests departed, and we girls and Harry and Grey went up to mother's boudoir, and made ourselves as comfortable as possible, and had tea and wine and things brought up, and altogether promised ourselves a very pleasant time.

Fragoletta and I had changed our fine dresses for two pretty wrappers. We did not mind the boys, and Harry was—almost—one of the family. Fragoletta's was a deep rich claret colour, trimmed with soft creamy lace, and suited her admirably; mine was pale blue, with touches of deep claret colour here and there.

"This is rather jolly," I said to Grey,

as I leaned back in the easy-chair and sipped my tea in lazy comfort.

"Yes, you women certainly know how to take care of yourselves," he said.

"Oh, and of course you men don't! You have no billiard-rooms, and smoking-rooms, and clubs, and other luxurious abodes!" I said ironically.

"Is there any just cause or impediment why we shouldn't?" asked Harry.

"The marriage-service seems running in your head a good deal, old fellow," laughed Grey, "and yet, to the best of my knowledge, you didn't hear any of it."

"Perhaps I am going to take part in it soon," he answered, glancing across at me.

But I was too deeply absorbed in the contents of my teacup to notice either the remark or the glance.

"Talking of the marriage-service,

though," he continued, "I have taken part in it lately. At least, I saw a friend of mine through it before I left India; and really, of all the melancholy bridegrooms that have ever been exhibited as a warning to their compeers, I think none could have beaten him."

"Indeed!" I said, growing interested of course. "Do tell us about it."

"Well, it's a queer enough story, but I'll make it as short as I can," he said, settling himself comfortably in the great lounging-chair. "You know Rayburne, my great friend? He told me he had made your acquaintance when he was home on leave."

"Yes," I said eagerly, flashing one rapid glance at Fragoletta, who had turned as white as death.

"Well, he and I were in the thick of the fighting at S——, and pretty tough

work we had. Having given the black fellows a taste of British steel and gunpowder that they're not likely to forget in a hurry, we were in hopes that the worst was over, when suddenly, one night, the news came that they had fallen upon a station about a hundred miles off and massacred every soul there. Of course we had orders to proceed at once to the spot, and found it quite true. The whole place was in flames, and the few Europeans who lived there, had either been killed or fled at the first alarm. Well, Rayburne and I were sitting in our camp that night and talking of it all, when suddenly there came a message from one of the sentries, to say a young European lady had made her way to where we were, and insisted on seeing Rayburne. He, of course, admitted her, and found that she was the only one who had escaped. She had

managed to conceal herself in the jungle till the miscreants had departed, and on recognising the English uniform, had come to throw herself on our protection. It turned out that she had had some previous acquaintance with Rayburne, and in fact, the moment I saw her greet him, I knew how the land lay. The girl was over head and ears in love with him. She was a pretty, simple little creature, the daughter of a civilian. We all supposed her father to have been killed, and in the state of the country we really did not know what to do with the girl. It was impossible to send her back, and equally impossible to keep her in the camp. However, she had thrown herself on Rayburne's protection, and he was too chivalrous a man to ignore her helplessness. Well, to make a long story short, she insisted on coming with us, and there

really seemed no help for it. Fortunately, we soon caught the rascals who had committed the outrage, and marched them back to head-quarters. Then Rayburne told the story of the girl's presence, and she was placed under the care of one of the officer's wives. But her strange adventure and her unprotected position made the ladies look rather coldly upon her, and her wild and unconcealed passion for Rayburne soon grew too evident to be a secret to anyone except himself. One day, however, he came to me in such an agony of mind as I had never witnessed.

"'Ross,' he said, 'the general has been having a talk with me about Miss Graham. He says there is only one course of action for me to pursue as a man of honour. She has been under my protection, and——' (how ashamed and confused he looked as he said it)—

'and they say she has learnt to care for me in a way I never dreamt of —that her health and reason are both impaired by this mad fancy. What am I to do?'

"'I know she has been talked about,' I said.

"'Talked about! But how? Why? Can anyone be so blind as not to perceive that circumstances are alone to blame? Could I have acted otherwise than I did?'

"'People say you should have sent her here at once,' I said.

"'I could not. Nothing would induce her to go, Ross. You surely don't think I am to blame?'

"'No,' I answered, 'I do not. But society is not so easy to satisfy, and a woman's fame is easily tarnished. You see, if a girl puts herself in a question-

able position, she will be looked upon as a questionable character.'

"He looked at me imploringly.

"'What am I to do?' he said. 'Marry her I cannot. She is not the girl I should ever choose for a wife, and she will soon forget me. This is merely some whim—some fancy.'

"'Have you seen her lately?' I asked.

"'No,' he said, hesitatingly.

"'Ah well,' I answered, 'if you saw her you would not talk of whims or fancies. What with the cold treatment she receives, the ill-natured slanders she has heard, and the ill-fated love preying upon her mind, the girl looks next door to death.' I shall never forget the look on his face. You do not know Rayburne, Clarice, as I know him, though you have heard me praise him warmly and often. But he is so gentle, so generous, so full

of chivalry and honour, that no more cruel position could have been forced upon him than this. He seemed quite unable to decide.

"'Come,' I said at last, 'after all, it is not so terrible. The girl is pretty and gentle, and has money too, and will make you a devoted wife. Besides, you have no other attraction; you have often told me you were heart-whole. Why not make her happy? It is so hard for a girl to get talked about, and it's no use being innocent if you look guilty.'

"He held up his hands to stop my words. 'Don't say any more,' he said, 'I must think it out for myself.'

"He went away then, and the next thing I heard was that he and Miss Graham were to be married immediately. A fortnight later they were man and wife."

As Harry ceased his story I drew a long breath; then I turned indignantly upon him.

"How could you advise him so?" I said. "How could you tell him to sacrifice his whole life and future to a mistaken notion of honour? Ah, well may I say I hate India, if this is a specimen of how girls' characters are slandered and men's chivalry sacrificed!"

Harry looked at me with undisguised amazement.

"I do not think you quite understand," he said gently. "What else could he do?"

"What else!" I retorted. "Why, talk common sense, of course. Tell the silly, chattering women to mind their own business; and as for the girl—why, he should have advised her to go away, and shown her clearly that he did not care

for her. What happiness can arise from a marriage begun in such a mistaken manner? I haven't patience to think of it!"

And all the time Fragoletta sat there —her hands tightly clasped, her face blanched to the hue of marble, the light in her eyes changed to a dull dumb anguish that told of the pain she was silently enduring.

So brief a while before and she had been at least content. She had had her golden dream to think of, and to idealise it into the more perfect rapture that time would bring; and now—— I turned away; I could not look. It was as if death had seized her in its icy grasp, while still the pulse of life beat on in heart and vein, and could not be stilled or silenced, despite the agony of living.

"I am sorry you take it so seriously," resumed Harry at last. "But, of course, women always judge of these things in a different way to men. Honour is so much to us."

"Honour is all very well," I said impatiently; "but will you tell me who, in marriage, has to bear the consequences of an unwise choice? The people individually, or the relations, and friends, and scandalmongers who have hounded them on to commit an act which involves only suffering and misery for the future?"

"A Daniel come to judgment!" scoffed Grey. "Hear, hear!"

"The people themselves, of course," answered Harry, disregarding Grey's interruption and answering my question.

"Very well," I said triumphantly. "Then they alone ought to have liberty to choose. If the result be unlucky, still

they have no one else to blame, no other hand to curse for forging the chain that circumstances render more galling each day it is worn. It is a shame and a sin that, in the one most important and responsible act of life, and the one from which there is no release save by disgrace or death, we should be allowed no liberty of choice, no absence from control; that our own unbiassed judgment, and the dictates of our safest monitor, the heart, should be overthrown or pushed aside to make room for the interference of a pack of people who have, after all, nothing to do with the after-consequences of our choice."

"Why, Clarice, what has come to you?" cried Harry, surveying my excited face and trembling hands with undisguised amazement. "To think of *you* talking like this!"

"She's coming out strong, isn't she?" said Grey, laughing. "Clarry on Matrimony. Front seats, ten-and-sixpence; back seats, five shillings. Come, ladies and gentlemen, the lecture has begun. Walk up, walk up!"

"You may laugh as much as you please," I retorted indignantly. "But I am quite in earnest, and what I say I know; and if more people acted on those principles—well, Sir James Hannen wouldn't have so much to do, I'm sure."

"Perhaps he would not thank you for that, or the lawyers either," said Grey. "Everything has its use, you know, even social errors and crimes!"

"Was—did Major Rayburne seem happy when you saw him last?" I asked Harry hesitatingly.

"Well, he never was a man to show his feelings much," he answered. "He

is very quiet and reserved, but she is radiant. She perfectly adores him. I suppose in time he will love her too. A man must be very cold and hard-hearted to remain long insensible to a pretty woman's devotion."

"Clarry," exclaimed Grey's voice in alarm, "look at your friend! Whatever is the matter with her?"

I sprang up. Fragoletta had sunk back in her chair in a dead faint.

Ah me! I think I know her secret only too well now.

CHAPTER VIII.

A LOVERS' QUARREL.

My poor little friend, how sorry I felt for her!

We used restoratives and banished the men, and then, when she regained consciousness, I went with her to her room and insisted on her lying down.

"It is the fatigue and excitement," I said, "that has upset you. You are not strong enough for so much racketing about."

She sighed, and lay back with closed eyes. Once or twice her pale lips moved

as if she would have spoken, but no words came.

"Don't mind, dear," I entreated; "don't trouble to speak. Just lie quiet till dinner-time, you will be better then."

She seized my hands and pressed them to her lips.

"Clarice," she said faintly, "you are so good. I cannot thank you; but I think you understand."

"Yes, my dear," I said softly; "I understand."

The colour stole back to her cheek, then faded away, leaving her paler than before, but her sweet eyes opened and looked up to mine with the candour of a fearless innocence.

"I could not help it," she said; "I thought of him, and dreamt of him; I knew he could have no such thought for me; but——"

The deep flush stained her face once more.

"It was only a dream," she added softly. "He is another's now. I—I must try to conquer myself."

She did not say: "I must try to forget him." I do not think it was in her to do that easily, or, indeed, ever.

I rose and left her then, feeling my eyes wet and my heart heavy with the pity I felt for her. Besides, I knew she was weak and unstrung now, and that, later on, when pride came to her aid, she might repent of the confidence that had escaped her in a moment of weakness.

As I reached the door I heard a faint sob, and when I looked back I saw she had buried her face in her arms and was weeping bitterly.

"It is better she should cry," I thought; "her tears will do her good."

But I felt so sorry and so pained for her. She was so young, and in most things so unlike the girls I had ever known, that I felt at a loss to imagine how she would take this great sorrow. I felt angry, too, at Major Rayburne's folly.

Why need he have sacrificed himself in this needless fashion? And yet his doing so seemed but conclusive proof to my mind that, indeed, he had had no love for Fragoletta, as I had all along imagined.

He had thought of her but as a child—fascinating, interesting, piquant; and all the time every look and word of his had been treasured up and interpreted in her own sweet, vivid, imaginative way by her! He had never so much as thought of her with any seriousness that could have built up a fabric of happiness for the future of both.

"She was right. Love is cruel," I said to myself.

Fragoletta did not come down to dinner that night, but she joined us later on in the evening, and even took part in the dancing.

As for me, despite my own happiness, despite my joy at Harry's presence, I felt depressed and ill at ease. That look in the girl's eyes haunted me; that restless, feverish gaiety, so different from her usual calm composure, told me too much of the bitter smart and cruel aching of the brave young heart beneath. She attracted much admiration. In her simple white dress, with that rich feverish flush in her cheeks, that strange brilliance in her large soft eyes, she looked beautiful enough to be a rival to most of us; but flattery and attention were alike wasted on her. She

was as loath to accept them as if she had owed her whole heart's fidelity to one man, and the homage of others had seemed a wrong to him.

Perhaps some such thought was in her mind. I cannot say; for even I, dearly as I love her, cannot quite understand Fragoletta.

"Harry," I said, towards the close of the evening, as we sat together in the conservatory, "do you think—I mean, did Major Rayburne ever seem to care about anyone else in—in India, before this strange marriage of his?"

"No, never, to my knowledge," he answered. "You see, Rayburne was never a man to think much of women. He was awfully run after, but I think, as a rule, they bored him."

"But when he went back to India this

last time," I persisted, "did you notice—did he seem any different?"

"What are you driving at?" asked Harry, looking at me in surprise. "You don't mean to say, surely, that he fell in love with you, when he knew that I——"

"No, no, no," I cried impatiently; "he was only just decently civil to me. I don't mean anything of that sort; only men sometimes have confidential moments, haven't they? I—I thought he might have told you if he had ever cared for anyone."

"He never told me anything of the sort," answered Harry wonderingly. "He was the last man in the world to talk about himself or his private feelings. I thought he seemed unhappy and restless of late, but he never gave any reason, and I never questioned him as to the facts."

"And you are sure he does not love his wife?" I persisted.

"He certainly never thought of her as a wife, until the circumstances arose of which I told you."

"And before you left, did you see him then? Did he say anything?"

"My dear girl, how curious you are on the subject! I shall begin to feel quite jealous."

"But do tell me," I entreated.

"Well," said Harry dubiously, "he looked rather more cold and gloomy than of yore; but he was all courtesy and gentleness to his wife, and, as I have told you already, she adores him. You see, Rayburne is the last man to wear his heart on his sleeve, and not even his dearest friend would have an insight into his real feelings on such a subject."

"But don't you feel sorry for him?"

I asked. "Don't you think it is a pity his life should be sacrificed to a mistaken notion?"

"Clarry," cried Harry impetuously, as he sprang up and put both hands on my shoulders, looking down meanwhile into my eyes to read the truth, "what does all this mean? Whence arises this strange interest of yours in Rayburne and his actions? It is something more than mere curiosity that prompts your questions. What is it?"

"I ask from no personal interest, I assure you," I said; "only I am sorry for him. I thought his future would be so different."

"And who was to make it different?" he asked jealously. "According to you, there was no one at Woodfield or at Leathorpe with whom he was on any terms of intimacy, except yourself and

the Fanes. Clarice, what am I to think? Did he—did he seem to care for you?"

"That is so likely," I said scoffingly.

"Very likely indeed," he said coldly, as he dropped his hands and turned away. "You spare few men that come in your way, Clarice. I daresay poor Rayburne shared the same fate."

"Harry," I cried indignantly, "how dare you speak to me like that? I am not such a flirt as you make out. Come," I continued coaxingly, as I slipped my hand into his, "don't look so cross. You don't want to quarrel with me, do you?"

Could I believe it? He actually dropped my hand, and turned away!

For a moment I was silent, battling with my wounded pride, my loyalty to Fragoletta, my indignation with my foolish lover.

"I did not think you would be so silly," I said at last. "You said yourself that Colonel Rayburne was not given to flirting or troubling his head about women. Why should he have made an exception in my case?"

He laughed a dry harsh laugh, not a bit like his usual mellow tones.

"I don't know, I'm sure," he said with a very bad assumption of indifference. "It seems very unlikely, doesn't it?"

"Very," I said huffily, and rising from my seat as I spoke. "And if you have only come back from India to quarrel with me about nothing, I—I wish you had stopped there!"

"Do you?" (in a tone of keen pain that made me ashamed of my childish petulance). "Well, that can soon be remedied. I can always go back, you know."

"Harry!" I said indignantly, "what

are we quarrelling about? You really are too absurd. This is just the way you used to go on before, and now you are beginning again. What have I done, I should like to know?"

"I should think you could answer that question best yourself," he said.

"So I can," I answered, with rising indignation; "and that is—nothing!"

He came a step nearer, and when I saw his white face, and remembered all he had gone through, and how weak and ill he still was, a feeling of compunction overcame me. The tears rushed to my eyes. Involuntarily I stretched out my hands.

"Oh Harry dear!" I cried plaintively. "Surely there is trouble and suffering enough in the world, without making ourselves voluntarily miserable."

He turned to me and took me in his arms.

"Clarice!" he said, "I love you so —I hate to think that others seek to win your favour too. Oh child, tell me that in your heart you do care for me—that you have not quite forgotten my long and faithful love—that you give me yours in return, if—if only a little."

"A little!" I felt a smile stealing over my lips as I looked up into the yearning, passionate eyes above me. "No, I don't; I love you a great deal; more than you deserve. More—oh Harry!"—(and my confident voice dropped and my head sank on my darling's breast)—"more than anyone I have ever known; more than anyone I ever shall know! Are you satisfied at last?"

Apparently he was. But oh, how I pity Fragoletta now!

. . . . . .

It is night again.

A whole day has passed since Harry and I quarrelled—so nearly. We are very happy. The governor has consented freely to our marriage, and I am at present trying to overcome, or let Harry overcome, my objections to India.

They say one marriage makes many, so in all probability, before the end of Harry's leave, we shall be married. He says in six months, but I wouldn't hear of that. It is much too soon. Fragoletta has just left my room. We have been having a long talk together. I wish—oh I wish I could give her some of my happiness! But I can only hope and pray that in time to come her heart too will find rest and peace.

"If one could love Art only," she said to me to-night, "one might be happy. It is our earth-born rivals that come between our hearts and her, and so destroy

her power and cool her charms, and rob her of the allurement she once possessed."

"Yet no art can bring the happiness that a warm human love can do," I said; "at least not to a woman."

"Perhaps you are right," she said; "at least not to a woman."

The look in her eyes grew darker and deeper; a strange pathetic yearning filled them.

"After all, we are so helpless," she said. "Even when we have genius, the womanhood within us cries out for something fuller, sweeter, more earth-born than that. The laurel that springs from a woman's breast is bitter with pain. The story of Daphne holds good its own in every age. The bay-wreath on a woman's brow is of less account than the love-token that rests warm upon her heart."

I had not asked her anything. With

but few words and little explanation we understood each other, and she knew, I think, as well as I myself, that my whole sympathy was with her in this struggle she so bravely carried on.

And, watching her girlish patience, and brave uncomplaining fortitude, I learnt a lesson that I knew I should never forget, that did me more good than preached sermons or philosophical treatises; that made me think more humbly of myself, more considerately of others, than a year ago I should have believed it possible to think.

One thing I saw in her, and it showed how pure and innocent a soul was hers. There was no sense of shame or humiliation crushing her down. She had given her love with many struggles, with much reluctance; but, having given it, she was too conscious of its pure and humble

worship to fear any reproaches. She seemed of little value in her own sight, because neither herself nor her love were of any account to him; but none the less was he her hero, her king among men.

I knew this, and trembled lest again they might meet—lest he, seeing her beauty, and her genius, and the greater charm that womanhood and sorrow had lent the childish face, should find, too, that the old allurement she had held for him had increased by absence, and all unwittingly a greater misery should open for them both.

I said no word of such a thing to her. Rather I tried to lead her thoughts to dwell on his new ties, his new position; and sharp as was the pain that such allusions brought, I yet dared not spare them.

"She will thank me one day," I said to myself, looking sadly at the wistful young face that now had so sad and strange a beauty.

Book III.

CHAPTER I.

FRAGOLETTA'S STORY.

How I have neglected my journal of late!

I had made up my mind to keep a regular account of all that happened at Wyefield, but since I took up my painting again, I have not done so. I have always determined to put down a faithful record of my thoughts and feelings, and yet I shrink from doing so now. I knew that it was something more than a girlish fancy, this regard for Colonel Rayburne, and now I have learnt that he is no

longer free, and that to worship him in secret, as I have so long done, is a sin, forbidden by that code of worldly morality which treats human hearts as machines that can be made to love and unlove at order.

"Was it all my fault too?" I asked myself this question, looking back with clearer eyes on those past days that his presence had made so sweet and glorious. I asked it, remembering how he had lingered by my side in noons and nights, and listened to my singing, and talked to me, by plainly-shown preference, in that half-cynical half-teasing fashion I had grown to care for so dearly.

Need all love be written and spoken any more than the poems which a beautiful thought embodies, or a beautiful scene inspires? We feel the meaning of both —we need no words to explain it. And

so, it seems to me, that there is more eloquence often in a look, a smile, a touch, than in a million words.

Many such looks of his had set my heart beating wildly, had filled me with a soft strange trouble; had made me think, "It cannot be that I am quite a child in his eyes."

And, after all, he had gone away, only bidding me not forget him. As if, indeed, that were possible! There are people who spend a lifetime together, and yet never catch sight, for one single moment, of each other's souls; there are others, again, who by some subtle intuition can at once read and understand that inner nature which is, after all, the best part of ourselves—the one thing that makes even the sceptical believe a little in the mystery of the soul.

And I had caught many such glimpses,

and I knew that he was noble, and earnest, and brave of heart, and that even though I loved him unasked, it was a love that would do him no harm, nor ever make me feel ashamed.

But now——

Ah! it was all altered now. I had come up for the season with Clarice to London. Her sister was to be married, and they wished me to be one of the bridesmaids. And it was after the wedding (a month ago now) that I heard the news that has crushed out all the warm springing hopes of my heart. For he is wedded. My hero he may still be—my ideal of all that is noble, and brave, and true in man; but—nothing more. I did not think it was in me to feel as I felt when first those words reached my ears, spoken by his friend. I seemed to feel broken, old, stupefied. The sunshine of

my life turned to darkness. I tried to grasp at the truth, to feel the pity and the scorn for my own weakness that I ought to have felt, and yet—and yet——

They say I fainted. I know I woke feeling dazed and bewildered still; and then I saw Clarice's pitiful face, and in her eyes I read that she too knew my secret; and the shame, and the sorrow, and the misery of it all seemed to overcome me, and I cried as if my heart would break.

She went away and left me to my solitude and my grief, and I think those bitter passionate tears did me good. I grew calmer at last. I remembered the story I had heard, and I saw in it but a fresh proof of the chivalrous nature of the man I loved.

For why should I conceal it? I did love him. I do love him; and I do not

think I shall be any the worse woman for that fact, or need be classed amongst the sinning, because I can look it calmly in the face without false reasoning.

We cannot love because we *are* loved any more than we can prevent love from visiting our hearts whether we will or no. It steals upon us unawares, and only when we are bound hand and foot do we perceive how complete and absolute a bondage is ours. The wisest and weakest must submit alike. The passion is there; with each heart alone rests the power to ennoble or debase it.

And, sad to say, in the records of human lives it is often the least worthy who is loved best, the falsest who receive the truest fidelity.

For, indeed, in the world there are so many things wrong and crooked, that the greatest and wisest of humanity can

do but little to set it straight, even though they spend their lives, their means, their strength, in such unprofitable service.

Well, I have been fighting my battle for a month now, and I do not think even my tender-hearted Clarice quite knows how hard a one it has been.

But gradually youth and strength have asserted themselves. The interests, the occupations, the sorrows of a great city were new to me, and to none of them could I shut my eyes or ears, or even my aching heart.

But it was the poor for whom I felt so much. The poor in London, who have not the picturesqueness, the simple tastes and pleasures of those in my native land—who are shut out from the sun and air, and throng the dingy alleys, and narrow close streets, and seem to know life but for the sake of death, and live on in

squalid stagnant misery, from the year's beginning to its end.

And the little children—the poor, white-faced, wretched little children. Oh how my heart bled for them! and yet how little one could do to make them happy for even a little while. Money! Ah, but it goes such a little way, and I have seen the drunken father snatch it from the weak young hands, and hasten away to spend it among those as low and degraded as himself.

It was all so dreadful, so hopeless. It was that very hopelessness often that overcame me; that made my hot young heart rebel against the cruel injustice—the fearful wrongs that humanity suffers.

"How can Heaven let such things be!" I said passionately to Caryl Brooklyn, who was often my companion on some errand of charity.

He sighed. "You are not the first by many who has asked that question," he said; "nor am I the last who will fail to answer it."

And as the spring grew brighter and fairer, and the buds peeped shyly forth, and the warm sunshine lay on the parks and squares, and even the murky ugly city looked fresh and gay to my eyes, I thought more and more of the thousands to whom it brought no pleasure and no hope—who had to live and breathe, and endure existence as best they could—who might long for green fields and daisied meadows till their hearts ached with longing, and yet saw but dusty streets and choked lanes, and the tawdry frightfulness or barren desolation of their homesteads, and heard but coarse voices and fierce oaths, and saw the blue heavens afar off through packed and crowded roofs;

nor smelt the scent of flowers and clean fresh earth from the beginning to the end of life.

And one could do so little to help it; so miserably, pitifully little! Is it any wonder that my own sorrow grew small in comparison with the vastness of one that stretched itself like a funeral pall over all the width and length of one of earth's great cities—one only of all the many that men have built and sin has cursed?

I know the problem has puzzled wiser heads than mine. I suppose it will so puzzle and distress them till the end of time; but does that make it any the less painful for each one who compassionates and would fain help the misery that reigns on every side, and yet feels that each effort is but as a grain of sand that is laid for the foundation of a mountain?

"If your picture is sold, what will you

do with the money?" asked Clarice of me one day, when my visit was drawing to a close.

"I will give it to the poor," I answered.

"What a little Dona Quixote you are!" she said, looking at me in wonder. "Why, my dear, if you spent thousands of pounds on them to-day they would be as badly off to-morrow."

"I know," I said hopelessly; "but still if one can make even two or three happier for ever such a little while, it is something."

"You have done a great deal of good, I think," she resumed presently, "more in these two months than I have even thought of in the whole course of my life. You have found work for women, employment for girls, made clothes for children. I can't think how you can manage it."

"If I could only do more!" It was always my cry; it all looked so hopeless now, and I was soon going away, and the few who knew me would forget me; and the old grinding cares would fall upon them, perhaps, and their promises would no longer be remembered, and the drunkenness and disorder would be resumed. Yes, it was hard; and yet the more I felt the hardness and the difficulties, the more I longed to combat them.

I had almost forgotten my picture when, one morning, I received a notice to say it was accepted for the Academy Exhibition. I had called it "Riding down to Camelot," but the subject treated little of the story of the Lady of Shalott. There was the figure of Sir Launcelot on his steed—the sunlight

flashing on his noble face and on the blue river winding by that silent isle where dwelt the mysterious lady on whom, for his sake, the curse fell. Her pale face and wondering eyes looked out from the window—(the face of Clarice, altered to suit my fancy of the fated inmate of "many-towered Camelot"). But the knight, with his brave bright eyes and smile like sunlight, had in the picture that same face which haunted my waking hours.

I had not meant to make the likeness more than just a faint one, but insensibly it had grown beneath my fingers even as its memory lived in my heart, and Clarice had almost started when she saw it.

"Colonel Rayburne!" she exclaimed. "Why, what a capital likeness!"

"Is it so very like?" I asked anxiously.

"Oh Clarice, I hope not. I did not want it to bear more than a shadowy resemblance—just as your own does."

"It is like enough, for anyone who has known him, to recognise him again," she said, laughing. "But don't look so troubled, my dear, he will only take it as a great compliment."

I altered it a little, but I dared not do much for fear of spoiling the picture. And I asked Caryl Brooklyn to come and see it, anxious to know what he had to say.

He stood before the picture for a long time quite silent. Then suddenly he turned to me, his face very pale.

"He was with you that day in the woods," he said, pointing to my knight.

"I had no model," I said, colouring. "And, you see, I was obliged to draw from some type of face."

"You could not have chosen a nobler," he answered, with a faint sigh.

And in my heart I echoed the acknowledgment.

Ah me! that all seems long ago now, and we have seen Sir Launcelot on the Academy walls many times, and the critics have praised it more warmly than it deserved; and my head might well have been turned by all the flattery and commendation I have received, only that my heart is so sore within me; and as I look at my Sir Launcelot I know he is mine no longer, "but another's." And now, as if to complete my success, I have been offered a millionaire's cheque for it, and the noble offer came from no less a personage than Mr. Burton, of Fontayne Abbey.

"Shall you accept it?" asked Clarice, in wonder at the coincidence.

I thought of my poor—of the few whose misery I had tried to lighten, whose wants this money would supply for many months.

"Yes," I said; and when I saw the gladness and gratitude that the money brought to many a poor and suffering creature, I felt glad that, unconsciously to himself, the purse-proud millionaire had done some good.

And so those days, when my sorrow and I first became acquainted with each other, were not such cold and hopeless days as they might have been, and I did not isolate myself from the joys and pleasures of life because I partook of them with an aching heart and a memory that stabbed me with ever-constant pain.

When one is young, and has health and strength, and can rejoice in the beauty of earth, and read the poetry of nature, it is hard to believe that a

living death has fallen on the soul because the days bring only the remembrance of past hopes, and the years to come we shrink from thinking of.

I did not deceive myself. I did not attempt to let my heart dwell on future joys—on some chain of happy circumstance that might even now unite the broken links of our sundered lives. No, I put my dreams aside, tenderly, sorrowfully, as a mother puts by the little shoe or the tiny garment of the child she has buried. Suffering had taught me a lesson hard and painful to bear, but, thank Heaven, it had not robbed me of all faith and love—it had only made me more humble, and filled me with an infinite yearning for the sorrows and woes of others.

Meanwhile the season had run on its course, and my life had been full of gaiety,

and Clarice was so happy, it did one's heart good to look at her bright face. But in no pleasures or excitement did I ever find forgetfulness, and in no face or voice did there live the charm that that face of my knight, Sir Launcelot, had worn for me in my brief summer's dream.

"Can one be faithful to a memory only?" Clarice had said to me once.

And as I stood and looked into my own heart I told her, "Yes."

She laughed. She did not believe me; but then, all women are not alike; and, no doubt, to her I seemed a foolish child, to whom dreams are enough, and before whom the world lies untrodden and unknown.

CHAPTER II.

A WARFARE TO WAGE.

It was June when I returned to Wycfield.

The country looked lovely to me after the hot dusty streets of London, and in the garden, where the spring buds had not even burst forth when last I saw it, were great clusters of roses and full deep-foliaged trees, and all the perfect bloom and beauty of summer.

"How can people live in town from choice?" I said with a sigh of content,

as we sat under the trees that evening drinking tea.

"Are you glad to leave it?" asked Aunt Charlotte.

She is much kinder to me now, and we are very good friends.

"Indeed I am," I said heartily; "for some things."

"Your taste of a season has not changed you much," said Aunt Jane. "We feared you would come back quite a fine fashionable young lady."

"I don't think I shall ever be that," I said gravely. "It is not in me."

"You get more like your father every day," observed Aunt Charlotte. "Only all the St. Quentins have fair hair."

"Had you, aunt?" I asked innocently, forgetting the front.

"When I was young, yes," she answered quite coolly.

"Did you make many friends in London, Fragoletta?" inquired Aunt Jane, in the awkward pause that followed.

"No," I said. "Somehow I can't make many friends, aunt. I like just one or two people. I could not fritter away my affection on a number. By-the-way, I saw a great deal of young Brooklyn. He has taken up literature. I think he is very clever."

"Do you mean Squire Brooklyn's son?" asked Aunt Charlotte eagerly. "I am sorry you have made his acquaintance. There can be no friendship between Wyefield and Leathorpe Hall."

"But he is not answerable for his grandparents,' or even his parents', misdemeanours," I said indignantly. "He is very nice, and quite different from the old man."

"No Brooklyn was ever yet a safe friend

or a true lover," said Aunt Charlotte sententiously. "I am more sorry than I can say that this acquaintance has been formed."

I flushed hotly, and the fact of my aunts' perceiving that tell-tale colour, in no way lessened my confusion.

They glanced uneasily at each other. Then Aunt Charlotte spoke again.

"I hope there has been no nonsense of any kind between you," she said coldly. "There is a reason that makes anything in the shape of love or marriage impossible between a Brooklyn and a St. Quentin. If I had thought that by any chance you would have met and associated with this young man, I would have warned you."

"There will never be anything of that sort between us," I said calmly, "so set your mind at rest on that point, dear

aunt. But even if there was, what is the objection?"

"I cannot tell you," she answered, glancing uneasily at her gentler sister. "It is sufficient, or ought to be sufficient, to you to know that such a reason exists —that nothing can overcome it, and that I have the greatest abhorrence of the whole race, and the worst possible opinion of their characters. Your father, were he living, would say the same."

"Ah well," I said with a sigh, "I am not likely to fall in love with him, simply because I ought not to. Still, all the same, it seems to me a little unjust that he should suffer for the sins of his family. Has the old man been seen anywhere lately?"

"No," said Aunt Charlotte. "They say he is madder than ever. I do wish he did not live so near!"

I echoed that wish, looking with a shudder over to where the gray and pointed gables of the old Hall rose, catching the sunrays everywhere now, and gaining a momentary brightness from the contact.

"It looks as if it were on fire," I said suddenly, pointing to the dazzling brilliance that flooded the desolate place.

"Or bathed in blood," said Aunt Jane, for the reddened glow of the sky was turning to crimson now.

"What a horrible idea!" I exclaimed, "and from *you*, Aunt Jane."

"Well, my dear," she said meekly, "it is true, even though horrible. There are other ways of murdering people than by shot and steel, and the Brooklyns know it."

"Yes," said Aunt Charlotte, rising from

her seat and looking at me with stern and sorrowful eyes, "and so, Fragoletta, did —your father!"

"My father!" I exclaimed, astonished at her strange looks and words; "what had he to do with them?"

"It is well you do not know," she said sadly. "It is well there is no need for you to know. I hope the day may never come when *that* story must be told."

Something in her look and voice awed and held me still. She gathered up her soft black laces, and with no other word went back to the house, and left us sitting there.

I turned to Aunt Jane in wonder.

"What has disturbed her so?" I asked.

She looked at me, her eyes dim and sorrowful.

"She thinks of the past," she said. "It has held many troubles for us, dear child. Be glad that you are young and free of heart still, for sorrow is a sad visitor, and one whose memory lingers long after its presence has departed."

"I suppose everyone has troubles more or less," I said. "One need not come to more than seventeen years to know that."

"Only, to the young, forgetfulness is easier," she answered gently.

I was silent. I wondered whether forgetfulness would be easy to me. My thoughts went back to my dream of only a short summer time ago. How great a difference seemed between me and it! I looked up at the clear soft blue of the sky—blue and soft as ever—and yet something was lacking in its beauty. The stars gleamed through the thick arched boughs, the wind blew a cloud of falling

rose-leaves across my face; everywhere it was so quiet and so still, and afar off the music of a nightingale's song rose on the air.

Why did my eyes grow dim as I gazed on the familiar beauty of earth and sky? Why did I not dream on in the summer moonlight, as a year ago I should have dreamt?

Ah! the change lay in me alone. I could no longer be glad with a child's simple gladness, because my heart no longer slept a child's untroubled sleep; and where love burns, the lustre of other light grows pale and faint.

A tear that fell on my clasped hands aroused me. I started to find I was alone.

"This will not do," I said to myself sternly. "I ought to have done with dreams now. I must begin to live and be of use."

With the next morning I rose early and went to my studio. Neither of my aunts had objected to my converting one of their empty attics into a painting-room for myself, and my happiest hours were those I spent there at work.

After all, art is Love's best rival, for it absorbs thought and interest, and gives employment for the lagging hours, and it has a longer life than love, though we may not believe it.

To art I turned for consolation again, having taken to heart those hints and pieces of advice which the critics had bestowed on my picture. I would strive to mend the faults they had pointed out, to improve the merits they had commended.

"He will hear of me one day," I said to myself, as I worked away diligently through the long bright summer hours.

"I should like him to feel proud of my work—to see that I can do something."

Once how he laughed and teased me when I told him I could paint!

"Pretty meaningless little daubs, like most young ladies," he had said. "Is that what you call painting?"

Ah well, if he ever sees my work, perhaps he will believe. I do not think of fame or care for it alone; the praise of one we love is sweeter to a woman than the united plaudits of the world: for all those plaudits will be little or nothing to her if one voice is silent, one face looks coldly on her work and sees in it no beauty and no grace.

For just that one alone would she desire to please, and her failure makes bitter all other triumphs.

After all, we are so helpless—where we love!

I spend the greater part of each day in my studio. I have an idea for a new picture, but I have only made a hasty sketch of it, and meanwhile I work hard at conquering those faults which have marred my previous endeavours.

And as little as possible do I suffer myself to think of my knight, Sir Launcelot, knowing that he can be nothing to me now, despite the love and reverence in which I hold him.

I heard much of his bravery—his skill and courage during the fearful campaign which caused the death of many a brave man and skilful officer. I have seen his name in the daily papers, and the notice of his new promotion, and my heart has felt proud of his greatness and rejoiced in his triumphs, though, after all, they can be nothing to me now. I may worship him from afar, and I do, knowing that

he will never know it; for, doubtless, he has no memory of me any longer, and the fair girl he has wedded will surely win his heart in time.

Did not his friend say so?—and he must know him well.

I am young, and yet at times life looks very hopeless to me. I cannot dwell on the future, or picture myself as loving and beloved; for no man will ever seem to me like him, and the echo of his voice rings still in my heart as he bade me not forget him.

Did he mean it?

I have thought sometimes he did not, for men say many things to women that they never think of again; and where love is, there will always be *one* who remembers best.

I have but one comfort in all my pain, and that is, that this marriage was in

some way forced upon him. He did not voluntarily woo and wed the girl. Had not Major Ross said he had never thought of marriage?

I wondered what she was like—whether she would make him happy—whether some day, in years to come, he would bring her to me, his child-friend of old, and I should have to greet her calmly as his wife?

I shrank with horror from the thought. My undisciplined heart cried out against that trial. I could bear his absence—his loss—but not that—not that!

For many days I have written nothing. I have worked hard and long during the hot midsummer hours, so much so that my aunts have declared that I am growing paler than ever, and insist on my taking more

outdoor exercise. So I rise early now; five o'clock often sees me out in the green lanes and among the dewy fields, where the cool clear air is like a draught of sparkling wine, and the wind kisses my pale cheeks into glow and warmth, and I drink in health and strength as I revel in the living sunshine.

How little we know of the real beauty of a summer morning when we lie asleep with closed blinds and darkened rooms! The songs of the waking birds, the glory of dawning light and radiance, the dreaming dusky shadows sleeping in the heart of the woods, the pearly tints of the water ere the sunlight reaches it—all these are lost and wasted on us.

The birds alone have it. Well may they sing their songs of glad untutored

praise! Their gratitude is indeed deserved.

I had always avoided the spot where I had met with my adventure ever since the time it occurred; yet in one of my morning rambles, being deep in thought, and paying but little attention to where I was going, I found myself close to the brook once more.

It was so early that the sun had not even penetrated the thick woods around; it was all dusk and cool, and the water looked dark as night beneath the heavy shadows of the boughs. A little chill of fear ran through me. I remembered the place so well, though I had only seen it once, and I thought of how I had wandered on and on till my ill-advised curiosity led me to penetrate the secret of the master of Leathorpe Hall.

Then I began to think of Caryl Brooklyn—of his gifts, his talents—his kindness to myself. I wondered why he would never tell me anything of that quarrel with his grandfather which led to his leaving the Hall and seeking independence in London. On that point he had always been strictly reticent, and I had not cared to question him too closely. Would his offence be visited on him I wondered, and would he one day find that his relentless relative had condemned him to a life of hardship and poverty as revenge for his one assertion of his own dignity? It would be quite in keeping with his character to do so, for those who offended him met seldom or never with forgiveness.

While my mind dwelt on these things I had sunk down on the gnarled and mossy roots of a tree near by, and was

watching half idly half curiously the slanting spear-like rays of sunlight as they stole through the thick leaves and fell across the water at my feet.

Suddenly I felt my shoulder clutched as with a grip of iron, and looking up with a faint cry of terror, I saw before me the wicked face and fierce malicious eyes of the old miser of Leathorpe Hall!

I was so frightened I could not have stirred, even had his grasp been less strong than it was. I shrank back from that evil-looking face so close to my own, and for some seconds neither of us spoke. Then he broke the silence, and the cruel voice I remembered so well said triumphantly:

"So I have found you at last, young lady! I knew my day of reckoning would come. No; stir or scream at

your peril"—(for I had made a violent effort to free myself from his grasp)—"I would think no more of taking your life than I would of crushing a fly! See here, now."

He took a pistol out of the breast of his coat as he spoke.

"If you attempt to move till I give you leave," he said, "I will shoot you dead!"

CHAPTER III.

THE SHADOW OF A SIN.

I SAT quite still, only looking with unconcealed horror at the old man's unshaven face, and wild eyes, and haggard unkempt appearance. It seemed to me, indeed, that he had little likeness to anything human, so ghastly and frightful was his whole person.

He put the pistol back again after his threat, but still kept his hold on me.

"Now, listen!" he said fiercely. "You are not the first of your hateful race who has done me wrong, but you shall be

the last, I swear! What—you to step between me and the object for which I have worked and toiled for years! Do you think I shall allow it? You have won that young fool's heart; you have come between me and mine. Doubtless you think, when I am dead, to share my gold and build the old Hall up in honour, and enjoy what I have forfeited. But not a penny of my wealth shall go to him. If you wed him, his portion shall be beggary and ruin, and he will have you to thank for it, even as my son had to thank *your* father!"

"I don't know what you mean," I said tremblingly. "I have nothing to do with you or yours. As for my father——"

"Don't name him!" he shrieked with sudden passion. "Don't name him! My bitterest curse be on his head, and on the heads of those he loved! Yes, you may

shrink and tremble. There is no one here to save you now, and you shall hear me to the end! Why did you tempt my grandson away? Answer!"

"I never tempted him away," I said. "I never knew he was going."

"You lie!" he said fiercely. "You lie like all your sex. Why should I expect anything else? You know it was your influence that came between us. I bade him give you up, and he refused. I told him to choose between banishment and beggary, and obedience to my will, and he chose the former. And then you tell me there is naught between you! Faugh! a child would not credit such a thing."

"We are friends—no more," I said quietly; "and the renewal of our acquaintance was totally against my wishes. But he came to my friend's house. I could not refuse to see him."

The sneer on his lips was more insulting than words could have been. I knew he did not credit one word I said.

For a moment there was silence, then he spoke again.

"I have given him his choice—he has taken it. If you are fool enough to wed him, you know what he has a right to expect; and you may share his fate if it pleases you."

"If it pleased me to do so, I certainly should," I answered calmly. "His riches or his poverty would make no difference to me."

"You say that, and you are a woman!" he said, loosening his grasp a little, and looking me full in the face. Then his eyes changed; a cunning leer played round his lips. "It is the other one," he sneered, "the fine military colonel—the

bastard who bears her name and looks at me with her eyes!"

I turned cold and sick as I heard his words, though I did not half comprehend their meaning. He looked with fiendish delight at my changed face.

"Ah, that touches you, does it?" he cried exultingly. "You did not think he too had claims to be a Brooklyn!"

"It is not true," I faltered. "He is not of your race. He cannot be."

To my dying day I shall never forget the devilish look he cast upon me. It had all the hatred and fury and defiance of a lost soul.

"Of my race!" he said, and the tones of his voice seemed to curdle the very blood in my veins. "No—curse him!—he is not. My wife's child he may be, but—he is your father's son!"

As he spoke he released his hold of me, but for a moment the shock and horror of his words held me dumb and stupefied. A vague, shapeless, horrible fear took possession of me. I could not speak or move.

Had he spoken the truth, or what purpose had he to gain by such a lie?

My aunt's words flashed across me—the memory of all she had said respecting the hatred of the two races—of some secret, sad and shameful, that she shrank from telling me; was it—could it be—this?

I sprang to my feet. I threw up my arms in wild horror.

"It is not true!" I cried. "Say it is not true, and I will bless you to the last hour I live."

A mocking laugh was his only answer.

He had had no tenderness or pity for living creature all his life; could he have it now? I sank down once more on the mossy seat; I buried my face in my hands to shut out the warm sunshine—the living beauty of earth. The unnatural horror of this thing that he had told me seemed to coil about my heart and crush out its pure faith, its dreaming fancies, its loyal tenderness for ever.

My father—whom I had so loved and reverenced! No, no! it could not be—it could not be!

I felt desperate—mad! I rose and threw myself before him and prayed him to recall his words.

"You have wronged your wife," I said; "you have banished your heir; but oh, have mercy on your son, who does not even know he should bear your name! Tell me this is false—it must be false!"

"If you doubt me, ask those at your home," he said, throwing aside my clinging hands. "They will not lie! Oh no, they are women. Ask them what banished your father from his home in the first promise and freshness of his youth! Ask them why he spent his life in a foreign land, nor ever set foot on his native soil again! Ask them why I turned my wife from home and shelter, and denied her and her child my name! Ask them"—(his voice grew wilder and fiercer, the light in his eyes more lurid)—"ask them, I say, what turned my love to bitterness—my life to misery—my heart to gall! Off—and ask them if I lie! As Heaven is my witness—no!"

He may have said more. I cannot tell. I had neither sense nor knowledge left; my heart seemed to beat, but with a slow sickening effort; my eyes lost sight and

sense of everything around. A deadly faintness stole over me, for if this were indeed true, what had life to give me in place of my lost faith—my fatal love, that was all shame, and horror, and degradation now! If this were true, why then, death could bring me no deeper pain nor greater terror. The life from my veins seemed ebbing away, but the cruelty of that horrible truth lived and burned like fire in my throbbing brain. Sin—shame—bitterness—all seemed to have burst on me with their fiery knowledge, and swept from my heart and life all fair and goodly things.

If I live to a hundred years I shall never forget the agony of those moments, or the abyss of misery which seemed to open before me in one lightning glance.

Darker and darker the shadows closed around me. I lay where I had fallen

at his feet in that moment of agonised humiliation. I could not stir or move.

I remember no more.

When I regained consciousness I was still lying face downwards on the mossy ground. I rose with an effort, feeling dazed and stunned. Then memory returned. The full horror of this story burst freshly on my mind, and paralysed me with its truth. I staggered to my seat and tried to recall all I had heard—all that he had called Heaven to witness was true. Could such an oath be false? The sickening shame which had laid me insensible at his feet stole over me again. If this were true, why, then, Guy Rayburne was—— I shuddered and tried to shut out the thought. I felt a nameless, shapeless horror of the sin that had so cursed my life, and yet —oh why should I doubt my father's

honour at the bidding of his enemy? I would rush to my aunts' side and entreat them to tell me the truth—however painful, however sad. At least they would not lie to me, even to save me from the knowledge of my father's shame!

I sprang to my feet and staggered homewards through the blinding sunshine, that only seemed to mock the misery at my heart. How I reached home I cannot tell; by some blind instinct my feet found their way, and brought me to the old familiar place. The entrance-door stood open, I passed in and went up the stairs to my own room.

A voice said to me: "Child, are you ill? What has happened?"

I turned and drew the speaker into the room, and threw myself at her feet, looking up at her face with an agonised entreaty that seemed to terrify her as she met it.

"Aunt Jane," I cried, "the story—the story your sister would not speak of last night—was it—was it——?"

A sob choked me, I could not put my meaning into words, but her face grew colourless as my own; the hands I clasped turned icy cold.

"Who has told you?—what have you heard?" she asked.

Then, in such poor gasping words as I could frame, I told her all. I kept nothing back—my fatal love, my sufferings, my shame and horror, all the pent-up misery of the past year, the agony of this day's knowledge.

"Is it true?" I asked, looking up in her face.

She hesitated. I saw her eyes droop—her lips tremble. The chill of fear crept icily to my heart again.

"Oh Heaven!" I cried, and my head

sank down on her lap as I knelt before her. "It is. What have I ever done that such suffering should come upon me?"

"Listen!" she said. "What I know you shall hear, and judge then for yourself. That your father loved Madge Brooklyn I know; that she returned it I know also; but that is all. Of wrong or guilt I can tell you nothing. I believed her innocent always; but Philip left here for Florence before her husband accused her of such shame, and then he refused to acknowledge her as his wife, and she fled, as I told you before. I have heard no word of or from her since; and if Colonel Rayburne be indeed her son, I do not know. I never heard her mention her maiden-name."

"But my father—did he say nothing—did you never ask him?" I cried eagerly.

"I told him the pitiful tale," she answered. "I know, too, that with what means he had, he spared no pains to trace her, but it was all in vain. From the hour she left Leathorpe no one here has seen or heard of her."

"But you knew my father," I said, rising and looking at her face. "You loved him too. Tell me, do you believe he would do a base or dishonourable thing like—like this?"

The colour glowed warmly in her cheeks. Her calm kind eyes looked steadily back to mine. "I do *not*," she said; "I never did. But your Aunt Charlotte does. She —she found their letters."

I was silent for a moment, my hands were pressed tightly to my heart to stay its laboured beats. A dreary unnatural horror of this trouble that had come upon me filled my heart. My eyes looked out

at sky and sunlight, seeing nothing—caring for nothing. My youth seemed all gone: killed by a lightning stroke of shame and agony. I turned away sick and despairing.

"If only I had never come here!" I moaned. "I have hardly had one happy hour since!"

She put her kind arms round me and drew me to her side, and tried with gentle words and holy counsel to cheer and comfort me.

But what was anything to me now? Love, faith, honour, all were shaken to the dust! I stood among the crumbling ruins of all my dreams of beauty and purity. I shivered and grew sick at heart.

I do not know how that day passed. I lay on my bed and shut out the

light from my aching eyes, and listened in a dull stupefied way to all the sounds of ordinary life and occupation going on around. Every now and then I roused myself from this stupor with a passionate disbelief.

"It cannot be," I cried. "Nature itself would have spoken out in my heart. It is a lie to ruin his happiness, as his mother's was ruined before. I will not credit it."

Towards dusk I rose. How strangely calm and cold I felt! Was this my wildly throbbing heart that beat now with so slow and dull a pain? I pushed back the hair from my hot brow, and dashed the cold clear water over my face.

"I have been mad," I said, "but I am sane now, though my youth is all dead. They have killed it here in this cold cruel

land. I will go back to my old home and work there. Art shall be lover and friend to me henceforth!"

And with all my heart and soul I meant it.

In the garden all was cool and quiet. I passed out and took my way to the wild deserted spot where first I had seen Caryl Brooklyn. I threw myself down and leant my hot head on my hands. I seemed to myself as something new and strange. I could not merge my identity into that of the quiet dreamy girl who had wandered thither but a summer-time ago. Now I felt stung, outraged, despairing.

Truly Fate had dealt cruelly with me, and all memory of love was bitterness.

The dusk deepened softly, and all the lingering shadows closed me round. My head was still bent on my clasped hands;

the loosened shower of hair fell over my shoulders and swept the ground on either side. Numbed, heartsick, desolate, I sat there, with neither sense nor sight of anything except my own misery.

Did I dream, or did a voice steal to my ear from out the shadows?—a voice whose remembered music could make my heart throb and leap with the gladness of the past? I tossed my hair aside and looked up.

Between me and the railings stood a tall figure. Dear Heaven! had I forgotten how brave and noble he looked till now? Once more I saw the moonlight fall on his earnest face and deep and steadfast eyes. Breathless I leaned against the iron bars and strove for speech, but found none.

"Have I startled you?" he said. "You did not know I was in England, perhaps. I only arrived last night. Dear

little friend, have you quite forgotten me?"

"No," I said slowly.

It was all I could say. I felt like one in a dream—the moonlight, the shadows, all whirled before my eyes. I clutched the cold hard rails and shivered where I stood.

"May I come to you?" he asked gently. "There is a gate farther up. Would you mind walking so far? I will meet you there."

"I will come," I said.

In the meadow beyond the garden we stood a moment later. I had given him no greeting. I had not even expressed surprise at his presence. But now that he stood before me once again I knew how I had longed for sight of his face—for sound of his voice. They came to me now in my madness and desolation as a

draught of water to parched and fevered lips, as hope to the dying in their hour of need.

And yet I was so still, so silent, so calm. Doubtless he thought my manner strange, for I saw a vague fear awaking in his eyes.

"You have been ill—you are in trouble," he said, taking my hand gently. "Tell me what has happened."

I drew a long deep breath.

"Yes," I said, "I am in trouble. But I cannot tell you. You could not help me."

He released my hand; the wonder in his face deepened.

"How you have changed!" he said, in a strange husky voice. "I left you a child. Now you are——"

"Do not speak of me!" I cried, with sudden bitter impatience. "Tell me of yourself. Why are you here?"

"Because Squire Brooklyn sent for me. I received a letter from my lawyer just before I left India, saying that matters connected with my mother's private affairs demanded my immediate attention. On reaching Southampton I found other letters —one from your eccentric neighbour, urging me to come to Leathorpe without delay on a matter of vital importance. So I came. I have been here an hour. I was told the old man was out, but expected home every moment. I am in a fever of curiosity to know what he has to say to me. My—my child! what is it?"

CHAPTER IV.

"MORE CRUEL THAN DEATH."

So it had come.

The blow was to fall at last; the vengeance of years to be accomplished; and now, in the pride and glory of his manhood, when fame, and honour, and renown were won, and the world's praises rang freshly in his ears, he was to hear the shameful heritage that was his portion; to learn, as I had learnt, that——

No wonder I turned sick and faint. He looked frightened as he saw my face. I clung to his arm desperately.

"Do not go," I entreated. "Do not grant him this interview. He is wicked, vile, malevolent. He will tell you lies that will poison your life—your future. Oh listen to me! I have never asked favour or request of you before. Do not go!"

He took my hands in both his own and looked kindly down at my excited face.

"You talk strangely," he said. "Why should I not go? What have I to fear from him—or any man?"

My eyes fell. A sort of despair came over me.

"I cannot expect you to pay attention to what I say," I murmured hopelessly; "only I know—I am sure—you will regret all your life long that you have granted this interview."

"Nay; you are talking nonsense," he

said. "He can do me no harm. There is nothing in my life that I am ashamed of. I have made no man an enemy. Tell me what it is you fear."

But I was silent.

What could I tell him that would not have seemed mad and foolish? What could I tell him of my own shame and sorrow? So I held my peace, and only looked sadly at the noble kindly face, and marvelled how he would meet me once he knew all.

"Come," he said presently, "let us talk of ourselves, or rather of you. Have you been well since I saw you—and happy?"

"Yes," I answered mechanically.

"And your friend—Miss Norburton—where is she?"

"In London," I said. "I have been there too."

"Ah!" he said, looking at me with keen curiosity. "Did you like it? Were you very gay?"

"I am not well suited for fashionable life," I said. "No; I did not care for it much."

There was silence between us for a few moments. How strange it seemed to have him standing by my side once more; to look at his face in the cool summer dusk, and go slowly back again to those days we had spent together ere ever my heart knew this bitter ache—this passionate regret!

But I remembered. At last I looked up at him, and my voice was calm and cold as I said:

"I heard of your marriage. Where is your wife?"

A strange look crossed his face—of pain, of longing—so it seemed to me.

"She is at Southampton with some friends," he said at last, and his eyes did not meet mine now.

"I—I must congratulate you," I said, trying hard to steady my voice. "I hope you are happy."

"Do you?" he said with a bitter little laugh. "Well, we were always candid with each other, you and I. We had better be the same still. I am *not* happy. What is more, I never expected to be happy. Did you think I should—Fragoletta?"

Just the same hesitating pause before the quaint name—just the same lingering sweetness in the voice that uttered it.

My heart beat more violently, the hot blood surged through my veins and flushed my cheeks. But of words I could find none to answer him, nor did he seem to

need them. He was looking down at my face as he had been wont to look; our eyes met, and so meeting looked straight through to one another's soul, and read there a truth that no flimsy disguise of speech could for once conceal.

There was no blush on my cheek, no drooping of lash or lid over the eyes that met his own.

Why should I fear him now? Only too soon he would know all; and whether he believed it or not, it could make no difference to us in the future.

"I should like to tell you how it was," he said, drawing his breath sharply, as if with pain. "I think you would understand."

"I do understand," I said simply. "I heard it all."

"And you do not blame me?" he asked eagerly, coming one step nearer to

me in the moonlight. "You do not think I could have acted otherwise?"

"No," I said slowly. "It was like you. No man of honour could have let a woman suffer for his sake, especially one who—loved him."

"Yes, she loves me," he said, and the pain in his voice seemed deeper now, and more full of yearning and regret. "But I had thought my life would be so different. I had planned a——"

"It does not matter," I said coldly, interrupting words I knew he would hate himself for having uttered, ere another hour had passed. "None of us can plan our lives as we wish; none of us can look at happiness and say it shall be ours. Fate is more cruel than death, I think."

"Have you found it so, you poor little child?" he asked, his voice shaken and

tremulous with agitation. "Have trouble and you made acquaintance with each other already?"

"Yes," I said, with a heavy sigh, "long ago. I am no stranger to sorrow, though you do think me a child."

"I have got over that mistake," he said quietly. "I knew what change had taken place when the woman's soul looked out of your eyes at our meeting."

I was so full of shame I dared not speak. Had I indeed betrayed myself so weakly?

"I hope your fate will be happier than mine," he went on presently. "It need be, I am sure. You are over young to love, but doubtless he you love is worthy of you, for I do not think you would care lightly or easily for—anyone."

I clasped my hands tight, as if their close firm pressure would ease my pain.

The blood flew in crimson torrents to my face and brow, but the gathering darkness hid it from his sight. He had not guessed—he did not know. I thanked Heaven from my heart that I had not betrayed myself so weakly as I feared.

"I have no right to ask for your confidence," he said quietly; "no right save that of a friend who has your welfare nearer to his heart than perhaps you imagine. But if there is trouble connected with your love, I would do all in my power to aid you, if only for the sake of the—old —days."

His voice faltered; how every word and tone pierced my heart afresh! But I kept silence still.

"Is it your aunts who object?" he asked.

I shook my head. Try as I might, I could find no words, for indeed I dared not explain to him his error.

"I see you do not trust me," he continued in the same gentle tone. "Well, I have no right to ask or expect it. Only of this be sure. Every wish that the heart of man can frame for the happiness of one it loves, my heart frames for you. And in the years to come, if my friendship is of any value or of any use, never hesitate to command it, if only for the sake of—a year ago."

A year ago! How despairingly my heart echoed those words. A year ago! one brief little year—twelvemonths in all the lifetime of us both, and yet how different looked that life now! how blank and desolate the future!

I shuddered as I stood beside him there—the moonlight on his white sad face, and oh, such love and sorrow in his eyes as once would have made my heart leap up in gratitude for the bliss that they

foretold. But now it was all wrong, all black, all sin and shame, and horror.

I shuddered, and my hands shut out his face from sight, and I knew that in all the years to come I should never know a moment so fraught with agony as this.

He could not read my thoughts. He only saw in my manner some strange repugnance to tell him what he had sought to know. He seemed to nerve himself with an effort. His voice grew chill and proud.

"I will see you to your home," he said. "It grows late now, and I must return to the Hall."

I turned away and moved on mechanically by his side. How much more should I have strength to bear, I wondered? How weary seemed my steps—how heavily my heart beat! No wonder he thought

me altered. Why, oh why could I not speak, look, act, as I had done a year ago?

The frozen apathy that sometimes comes with a great grief came to me then. In utter rigid silence I moved on by his side. Only this I knew—that ere we met again he would have heard what I so dreaded he should hear. He would be glad—so glad that on this night he had not betrayed himself, despite temptation.

And this thought gave me some sort of gladness in the midst of all I suffered then. My feeble efforts to keep this knowledge from him had been of no effect. Well, he must learn it for himself, and know that the sin that had cursed his life and mine had sprung from the self-same source. Of what use was any ignorance or innocence of ours, since the blight of a fatal error had fallen upon us

both; since once again "the sins of the guilty had to be visited on the innocent?" We reached the gate, and there we paused, and he took my hand in his, and swept the fallen cloud of hair from my brow, and tried once more to read my eyes. But now I shrank from his gaze. I only longed to be alone.

"I cannot understand you," he said sorrowfully. "So free, so frank, so open once; and now——"

"Now," I said passionately, "I am a woman, and a woman has to learn that to conceal her feelings is the highest wisdom the world teaches!"

"The world!" he said. "Ah, the world had nothing to do with the little frank-faced girl I left."

"No," I said, a dry choking sob bursting from my tortured heart. "But she too is changed now."

And not trusting myself to further speech, I freed my hands from his clasp and hurried away through the dusky trees, nor even paused or looked back till I found myself safe in my room once more. Then I cast myself face downwards on the floor in a passion of bitter weeping.

Of what use to live—to love?

Life seemed a hopeless weary puzzle—suffering its surest gift, sorrow its constant shadow. What madness was this upon me now? Could I never forget? Could I never win back peace or content to my heart again?

I was so young still, and yet to-night life seemed horrible, and the future desolate, and I could only lie there and weep, weep, weep; for love was dead for ever now, and I could but lie beside its grave and

wish that I too shared that everlasting sleep.

Of the days that followed I have but an indistinct idea. I was ill, I believe, but more sick of heart than of body. My brain seemed in a dull stupor. I could take no account of time, nor heed of the hours as they came and went. I only wanted to lie still and be left at peace, while in the world beyond my chamber-window the stir and hum of busy life went on, and gleams of sunshine stole in through the closed blinds, and the songs of birds thrilled through the summer air, and their wings rustled the rose-boughs against my pane, and seemed to woo me from my lethargy of weakness and despair.

One morning they brought me a letter. I took it with languid curiosity and laid it on my pillow. The writing was unknown

to me. I did not care to read it. I seemed to have lost all interest in life now. When I was quite alone, and they thought I slept, I opened it at last.

At the very first line I read, the blood rushed to my face, my heart beat wildly and madly, for the words were his:

"FRAGOLETTA (so it ran),—

"I know now why you bade me avoid that interview. I can imagine something of what you felt when you saw me and knew that I should soon hear the cruel lie that has been told to you. For it *is* a lie, Fragoletta. Do not believe one word of it. A lie so base and foul that I wonder I did not strike the man who uttered it dead at my feet. My child, have patience and I will tell you the whole story, sad and pitiful as it is. My mother was the

sweetest, truest, most honourable of women. She married when very young; a marriage that was forced upon her by her father, who was poor and in sore straits, and saw in her a means of rescue. A year after her marriage he died. She had no other relation in the world. All that she ever told me of her married life was that my father died when I was but an infant, and I never knew till two days ago that the name I have borne all my life is not my rightful name. Till I was seventeen we lived together in a quiet little village in Cornwall, and she devoted her whole life to me. She was universally beloved and respected, and the only man who knew her secret was an old lawyer, to whom she confided her story in her last hours, and with whom she left the certificates of her marriage and of my birth, also a few old letters from your

father and one from herself. These documents she declared were never to be given to me unless I learnt who my father was, and as I had entered the army and chosen foreign service, I can well believe she thought such a day would never come. But it did, as you know. I told you I had received a letter from a lawyer just before leaving India. This lawyer is my mother's friend. It appears that ever since Squire Brooklyn (I cannot call him father) met me in the ruins of Fontayne Abbey he recognised me by my likeness to my mother, and also by the name—her own maiden-name. He made inquiries from that day, and at last succeeded in tracing us to Cornwall—nay, more, he went thither himself, and applied to my mother's legal friend for the information he desired. The old man scented mischief, and led him artfully on to acknowledge his plans.

They were to overwhelm me with shame —to make my mother's name a reproach —to show me to the world as a nameless adventurer—to blast my fair career, and turn my life to bitterness. The old lawyer saw that now the hour had come which my mother had always dreaded. He lost no time in writing to me and asking me to hasten home. He telegraphed to me at Southampton, but I never received the message. I found, however, an urgent missive (as I told you) from Squire Brooklyn, and so I came on to Leathorpe at once. That night when I left you I returned to the Hall, but over all that passed between me and this man I will draw the veil of silence. Sufficient to say I left his presence, having told him such truths as I daresay he never heard before in all his life. I returned to Southampton. There I found the telegram, and an hour

after the lawyer (Mr. Polwhyn) himself arrived.

"Then I learnt all, and when I read those few noble manly letters of your dead father—when I saw how terrible the struggle between love and honour had been—how duty and faith, and the chivalrous pity he felt for a sad and suffering woman had been turned to the basest use by her vile husband, I felt—well, words can never tell you what I felt. Of one thing I am convinced: there is sufficient testimony to prove her innocence in any court of justice in England, and Mr. Polwhyn is now on his way to acquaint Squire Brooklyn with these facts.

"In the lawyer's opinion, the fact of his declaring his marriage illegal was a base fabrication, in order to get rid of her, for his jealousy made both their lives

miserable from the hour that he found she knew Philip St. Quentin. Had she wished to prove her own rights she could have done so, but she was broken down by tyranny, cruelty, and a hopeless love; she only cared for peace, and once she had fled from her home she knew she had given the world a handle against her. Poor mother! If I had only known how heavy a burden she bore during all those years when her tenderness and bravery were ever before my eyes! But she kept her secret well, and death has taken her from earthly justice now. But, my child, in the midst of all this trouble my heart turned to you. I know how you loved your father—how you honour his memory. I could not bear that you should suffer this shameful fear a moment longer. Trust me, Fragoletta. If only for your sake now, I will leave no stone unturned

till this mystery is solved and set at rest. But do not let it vex your tender heart a moment longer, for, believe me, if our parents erred, it was not dishonour or treachery that we need fear. Once they saw their danger they looked it bravely in the face, and though their hearts well-nigh broke in the struggle—they parted.

"GUY LAUNCELOT BROOKLYN.

"(I must now bear the name that is legally my own, though I hate it.)"

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